

# Saint Patrick



by Father Riquet

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# Preface

The Evangelisation of Ireland, mingled as it is with the life of Saint Patrick, is one of the most surprising facts in the life of the Church in the fifth century.

Beyond the limits of the Roman world, the conquest of a whole country was achieved in a few years by the initiative of one man.

True, Christianity had become the State religion of the Roman Empire. But Rome had never penetrated into Ireland. Thus, as regards the heathen population of that island, Saint Patrick found himself confronted with the same situation as were the Apostles in face of the Greco-Roman paganism.

The conversion of Ireland was effected during a period when it seemed that civilisation and the new religion must both disappear, swept away by the tide of barbarian invasion.

Yet Providence was even then preparing reserves of sanctity and learning, which in Gaul and Italy would, in the seventh century, be the leaven of monastic life and of that of the Christian people.

The Apostolic enterprise of Saint Patrick, if considered from a merely human standpoint, was conducted with rare prudence and skill. The change of religion in Ireland was brought about very rapidly, and without the opposition and persecution which marked the establishment of Christianity in all other countries of the West. This may doubtless be partly explained by the Irish character, and also by the social state of the country, a social state which will be referred to in this volume; but I repeat that it is chiefly due

to the intelligent activity of Saint Patrick that all shock and violence were avoided.

We possess only one single work in the French language on the Apostle of Ireland. This is from the pen of M. B. Robert. His *Critical Study on the Life and Work of Saint Patrick* is a thesis presented to the Protestant Faculty of Theology for the obtaining of his degree of Bachelor of Divinity. There is much that is good in it, but it is very incomplete.

Hence it appears to me that to introduce Saint Patrick to the public is to present to it the figure of an important, and, as it seems, but little known Apostle.

# The Irish Celts

The Celtic branch of the Indo-Germanic family was scattered over the west of Europe, and settled chiefly in the British Isles and in Gaul. The Celts of Great Britain formed two branches, the Irish or Gadelian branch and the Breton branch, to which belonged the Welsh and Bretons of French Armorica.

Although Roman writers give us some information concerning the customs of the people in Gaul, the character and life of the Christian Celts are scarcely known to us, except from Irish literature.

This literature dates from the Christian era, and therefore contains nothing of purely Celtic mythology. Religious legends are founded on classic and Christian traditions and also on historic memoirs peculiar to Ireland, but it is easy to separate these three elements. We know, too, that Christianity as established in Ireland by Saint Patrick caused no revolution in its public customs or in its political and economic traditions. The life of an Irishman in the fifteenth century was like that of an Irishman in the seventh, and the life of the latter resembled that of the Pagan and pre-Christian Celt.

We notice the extraordinary resistance of the Irish race to the adoption of the customs peculiar to the people who invaded their island in the course of centuries.

No Roman soldier ever set foot in Ireland. It may be that the occasion alone was wanting, as we know that after Augustus, Rome annexed no territory unless absolutely compelled to do so.

The first invaders of Ireland were the Danes, their incursions lasted for two centuries, they only succeeded in establishing themselves on the coasts, and made no changes in the customs and manners even in those parts adjoining their colonies.

In the twelfth century the Anglo-Normans penetrated farther into the interior of Ireland. But after a certain time, they were absorbed by the conquered race, and became "more Irish than the Irish themselves."

The English occupation alone succeeded in making a breach in the social and political state of Ireland, which rested on tribal laws, and the possession of land by the tribe. But the English law replaced that of the Brehons. However, many customs still survive, and above all the conquered race has never let itself be assimilated by the conqueror.

The Celts whom Saint Patrick evangelised would be the descendants of Milesius. The Milesians as legends tell us formed the fifth colony which occupied Ireland before the Christian era.

The first inhabitants were the Parthalonians, then came the Nemedians who were replaced by the Filborgs; the latter in their turn were driven out by De Dannans, sons of the goddess Danann, "the mother of all the gods."

These successive changes were brought about after obstinate and terribly sanguinary struggles. The inhabitants were simply exterminated by the invader.

One trait common both to the Celts of the continent and those of the islands was their love of war. In the third century of the Christian era the Roman geographer, Solinus, tells us that Irish mothers used to present the first food their sons could take, on the point of a sword. This detail which

we do not find in any Irish literary documents, and which is certainly legendary, only serves to show us the warlike reputation the Irish Celts had in the Roman world.

This had been gained by their continual incursions into Scotland and Great Britain.

On two separate occasions at least, we see that the Irish penetrated into Gaul. Niall, one of their most famous kings, was assassinated on the banks of the Loire, by the king of Leinster, one of his lieutenants.

There was constant strife between tribe and tribe, and between king and king, so that Ireland must have been quite exhausted by civil war. When the English made themselves masters of the island, there was hardly a million inhabitants left, whereas in Saint Patrick's time, there had been three or four times as many, to judge by the ruins of the numerous churches and fortified villages, which were found in regions entirely deserted.

Tacitus gives us some idea of the bravery of the Irish sailors and the activity of the merchants ("Vita Agricolae," chapter 24).

Like all savage conquerors, the first Milesians were no doubt plunderers, thieves and assassins. We have no mention of them until some centuries after their settlement in Ireland. The accounts we have of them celebrate the virtue of the Irish women, the purity of their morals, their beauty "and their long golden tresses falling over their garments."

The Irish Celt was monogamous and the husband had to give his wife a dowry. This custom is thus explained by legend:

"In the book of Leinster, we read that when the Milesians landed in Ireland, they found there some Jewish women, who had been brought there by a tempest from the Mediterranean. The Milesians desired to marry them, but they declared they would either return to their own country, or else have a dowry paid them, and hence, continues the book, it is the custom in Ireland for the husbands to seek their wives, while in the rest of the world it is the women who look for husbands."

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As regards the acquisition and possession of land, Irish law placed husband and wife on an equal footing. Women doctors and lawyers were not rare, which denotes a certain spirit of initiative and independence. The family appears to have been established on a solid basis. Women were respected, the aged were protected, and honoured; an old man if wealthy, could give up his land to his sons, and these would build him a separate dwelling, while if poor he was provided for by the tribe.

The Irish Celt was always ready to show hospitality. The death penalty did not exist. A tax, proportioned to the offence committed, had replaced the "law of retaliation" (lex talionis), which, however, in the case of murder, still survived in the vendetta. It seems to us probable, that the contemporaries of Saint Patrick did not hesitate to avenge themselves in this manner, because though the holy Apostle did his utmost to have the death penalty enacted for murder, he did not succeed, by which we must conclude that the Saint found an obstacle in that vindictive spirit which is so strongly marked a trait in the Irish character.

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Above all, the Irish race appears to us to be richly endowed with the gift of poetry. One finds this trait both in the great men of the Celtic race and among the people. Legends abound in its folklore, and in the two cycles of Irish story, that of Ulster which celebrates Conchobar and Cuculan, and that of Munster, of later date, which sings of Finn and Ossian.

Superstition peoples every grotto, rock, stream and fountain with spirits and fairies. Irish poetry is inspired by natural scenery. The Irishman loves the sea, the motion of the waves, the tempestuous breakers thundering against the rocky shores, he is fascinated by the forest calm, soothed by the wind sighing in the groves, cheered by the warbling of the birds; all this he regrets when exiled from his native land, and celebrates in the most intricate and ornate verse. He loves his country "for its peace, for its multitude of white winged angels soaring in the clear azure. Full of charms are the youths of Erin, wise are its aged men, gracious and comely its pure women, illustrious its noble-looking men."

The refinement of sentiment, and the freshness of expression, remind us of the Greeks. The names of places borrowed from observation of natural beauty are infinite; for example, "delightful wood," "silver stream," "hazel grove," "babbling brook," "crystal well," "the warbler's retreat," "melodious hillock," "bouquet of sweet-briar," etc.

This sympathy with nature creates a deep love for the native soil; add to this a sincere admiration for warlike prowess, and brave deeds, a lively sentiment of justice, an instinctive attraction towards the wonderful and the magical, and we have the chief characteristics of the Irish race.

# **The Political, Social and Religious State of Ireland - Christianity in Ireland Before the Arrival of Saint Patrick**

I

In the fifth century Ireland and we can trace this organisation as far back as its origin was divided into a great number of districts, each occupied by a tribe "tuath."

The tribe constituted the smallest political unity. The chief or king the "ri" of the "tuath" had seven men-at-arms under his command. This was the legal population, the word "tuath" was first applied to the tribe, not to the land it occupied. When it referred to the land it meant a tract with sufficient pasturage for 300 oxen.

The present baronies have the same boundaries as these ancient political divisions.

Naturally the tribes varied in importance. Certain warlike and enterprising chiefs succeeded in conquering their neighbours, and we hear of chiefs of the great "tuath" to whom three or four sub-kings paid tribute, or furnished hostages in token of their submission. Thus there were continual wars, and one is unable to find any really peaceful period in the history of Ireland.

However, the kings of a great "tuath" were exceptions and the agglomeration of the tribes was made under the authority of the kings of Leinster, East Munster, West Munster, Connaught and Ulidia (Ulster). This division,

according to the legend, was the work of the five brothers Firbolg, the sons of Dela.

But later on changes took place. The two kingdoms of Munster were formed into one, which occupied the south-west of the island, and extended from the River Suir to the Shannon. The king established at Cashel was the sovereign lord of the tribes scattered over this territory, while beneath him, the king of Thomond had succeeded in becoming the chief of a great "tuath."

On the north of Munster was Connaught, bounded on the east by the Shannon, and reaching on the north to the River Drowes.

The kingdom of Leinster occupied the south-east of Ireland and extended almost as far north as the River Boyne, which it no longer reached, for in the second century of the Christian era, King Tuathal had founded the new province of Meath, and had established his Capital at Tara. This king of Meath had become the *Ardri* or sovereign king of all Ireland. Until the time of King Tuathal all the Irish provinces met at the spot marked by a large stone called "The Stone of the Divisions." Near this stone some of the territory from all the provinces was taken, and thus formed the kingdom of Meath. The new kingdom included four of the chief towns which had belonged to the ancient provinces and were no great distance apart: *Tara* in Leinster, *Tailtenn* in Ulster, *Tlachtga* in Munster, and *Usnach* in Connaught. Tuathal built a royal residence in each of these towns, but he chiefly resided at Tara.

Until that time the *Ardri* or chief king of Ireland had maintained his suite, thanks to the tribute furnished by the kings of the provinces; henceforth he had a land of his own, and was able to create a court worthy of his rank.

The new kingdom extended from the Shannon on the west to the sea on the east, and from the countries of Monaghan and Armagh in the north to those of Kildare and King in the south. At the extreme north of the island was the province of Ulster or Ulidia. Three kings seemed to have ruled over the three chief divisions of this region: Oriel, Aileach, and Ulidia, properly so called. We do not find that the authority of the king of Ulidia over the northern kings ever equalled that, for instance, which the king of Cashel exercised over the two divisions of Munster, and over Thomond in the south.

## II

There was in each tribe as in each province a royal family. In one sense the royalty was hereditary, but it was not so in the modern acceptance of the word. On the death of a king the free-men of the rank of "aire" met together to choose his successor who was taken from the royal family. It might be the son, the nephew or the uncle of the late king. It was always an adult, whose personal aspect and qualities inspired respect.

The royal power was not absolute; the kings owed obedience to the laws by which their free subjects were governed. A kind of Minister of Justice supervised the royal administration. The occupations, rights and duties of the kings, were besides strictly defined by the Brehon Law.

In the clan, and especially in the province there existed certain hereditary offices, some were permanent, and those holding them were engaged at the king's palace; others were temporary, and their holders were permitted to live for the greater part of the time away from the court. These functionaries were supposed to devote all their time to their professional duties; and on that account they were given land to live upon.

On his journeys the Ardri or chief king was accompanied by a suite of at least ten persons: a noble, a judge, a Druid (later on a bishop), a doctor a poet, a historian and three servants. A guard was usually attached to his person. The king too was followed by his champion. Saint Patrick imitated this example, and also had his champion or strong man. This was Saint Mac-Carthen, who later on became the Bishop of Clogher. When the Saint was old, he used to carry him on his shoulders whenever during the Apostle's missionary journeys the way became difficult.

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It seems that when Saint Patrick landed in Ireland one royal family was predominant in the north. This was the family of Eochaid, and especially that of his son Niall.

Laeghaire (Lear), a son of Niall, was reigning in Tara, while a cousin of Niall governed Connaught. The sons of Laeghaire also ruled over a certain number of tribes in Meath.

I have already shewn how very fragile was the bond uniting these kings to each other and connecting the weakest among them to the kings of the provinces, and these latter to the Ardri or sovereign king. The fidelity of the sub-chiefs or tributary kings was guaranteed by hostages. The authority of the sovereign and of the provincial kings was chiefly exercised in military matters; often too, the call to arms did not affect the sub-chiefs. Thus we should err in speaking of one administrative authority, or of one strong central power exercising a direct action over every member of the tribe. Such action was an attribute of the chief or sub-king of each tribe.

Hence we may perceive the consequence of this in the apostolic mission of Saint Patrick. The Saint might

endeavour to convert the sovereign king or the king of the province; this was important, but it would not entail the conversion of the sub-kings.

These had to be won over individually. If the Apostle met with a favourable reception from the chief, it would dispose the rest of the clan in his favour; so that his conversion to Christianity would decide that of the whole tribe. The evangelisation would be successful if proceeding from the chief downwards, but if the reverse were attempted it would fail; in fact, society was a kind of feudality.

Below the king were the nobles, of every rank, who formed the upper class in the tribe. The second class were freemen, owning goods and cattle, and possessing land. The men in these two classes had, in varying degrees, a share in the government of the country, and were charged with administering the laws; they wore on their arm a bracelet as a distinctive badge.

The third class in the tribe or clan was formed of freemen, not owning lands or cattle. This was a most important part of the tribe; nearly all the merchants belonged to this category.

And lastly the class of men who were not free completed the tribe. In this group, they were of different grades and occupations. It included shepherds, labourers, and all persons poor and dependent, but protected by the clan; this was considered an advantage, as they were thus shielded from an attack by the neighbouring tribes.

Lowest of all in the social scale were the "fudirs" or real slaves, mostly strangers, prisoners of war, runaways, criminals and outlaws. They were allowed to live in the territory of the tribe, but might at any moment be expelled from it.

Saint Patrick during his captivity belonged to this class of "fudirs" and could well understand their wretched situation. We can imagine how the cry of the sons from the country of Foclut, where he had been captive, re-echoed sadly in his heart. "We beg of thee, holy child, to come and walk once more among us." To the Apostle this appeal meant not only the deliverance of these men from Satan, but also their rescue from their unhappy condition.

Bristol was at that time the great slave-market, and in Ireland slavery had taken firm root. The Synod of Armagh held in 1171 pronounced the Anglo-Norman invasion to be the punishment of slave traffic, condemned this horrible practice, and decreed that the English slaves should be free to return to their own country.

### III

The duties and rights of each class were minutely regulated by the king. One can thus imagine the great authority which he possessed over the tribe, and therefore the importance which a Christian missionary would attach to gaining his favour.

Without the king's protection, the establishment of Christianity remained impossible, on account of the rules concerning the land. In fact the soil did not belong to the individual, but to the tribe; a long occupation of it, by cultivation or administration appeared to confer some rights of possession. But there still remained a great deal of arable land, the property of the tribe, which was divided every two or three years if necessary. The mountains, the bogs, the lakes remained common property, which each freeman might enjoy for hunting and fishing, and of which he might make use for firing and building materials. Yet, however long the occupation had been, however legitimate and strong the

claims of ownership might appear, no one was really master of the land; this could not be alienated from the tribe, and could only be given to one of the clan with the consent of the tribe and the king.

Now a religion requires temples and property to ensure its existence. It was therefore necessary that the clan should grant the missionaries of the new faith the right of settling among them. Practically this permission was exclusively in the power of the king, for his authority was supreme in these questions.

His authority, however, did not extend to making the laws. In an extraordinary case an assembly of the tribe might exercise the legislative power. In point of fact the Irish submitted to custom.

The judges were called Brehons; their office was to explain and apply the laws. As we have said the penalty of "talion" (retaliation) was at first enforced, this gave place to the law of compensation (torts). The Brehons fixed the amount of fines and damages, oxen serving as the monetary unit.

In Ireland the practice of fasting was in vogue. One fasted in Border to obtain justice, or to bring misfortune on one's enemies. Legend shows us Saint Patrick practising this in order to defeat his opponents. The death penalty was non-existent.

One form of punishment consisted in abandoning the condemned man in a boat with neither sail nor oar. We find this custom in the legend in which Saint Patrick is shown ordering the brigand MacCuil, whom he had converted, to trust himself to the sea in a rudderless bark.

Such was the political and social state of the people whom Saint Patrick wished to evangelise. We must now study the



religion which was the chief obstacle to the Apostle's teaching.

#### **IV**

Irish Paganism does not appear to have been a well-defined system of religion.

Many words were used to designate God, but these terms did not apply to any particular god, the chief of the others, such as Jupiter. A great number of gods peculiar to them figure in the literature of the ancient Celts of Ireland, and are represented as divinities sometimes beneficent at others malevolent; these gods and goddesses of the Irish mythology were not the object of any worship.

The belief in fairies is still popular. They were thought to inhabit grottoes and caves, and to intervene frequently in human affairs. This intervention was, as a rule, detrimental to mankind, therefore fairies and phantoms inspired fear. We read in the "Tripartite Life" that the two daughters of Laeghaire perceiving Saint Patrick and his followers seated near a fountain when they were going to bathe, did not dare to advance, taking them for gods or spirits. This fear of the "Sidhe," divinities living underground was not confined to the daughters of Laeghaire.

The belief in these divinities was allied to the traditions concerning the De Dannans one of the first races which inhabited Ireland. The men, great magicians having been defeated by the Milesian invaders, the Milesian Brehon, Amergin, divided the land of Ireland between the victors and the vanquished. He gave, says the legend, that part of Ireland which is underground to the De Dannans and reserved the other part for his compatriots; as a

consequence of this judgment, the De Dannans retired to the caves and hills and to the palaces of the fairies.

One sees that this is simply a legend, and on such a fragile basis no very positive worship could be established.

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Yet we find everywhere, above all in the accounts of the evangelisation of Ireland, traditions which have traces of the worship rendered to these idols. The "Confession" is not precise on this point; it speaks in a general way of the idolatry of the Irish (chapter 41). If any god were adored it must have been the sun ("Confession" chapter 40). The "Tripartite Life " describes the idol "*Cromm Cruach*," which was found at Mag Slecht. It was plated with gold and silver, and surrounded by twelve smaller ones, covered with bronze and copper. Children were immolated to it, but by this is meant only a simple offering, not a real human sacrifice.

Long before the Christian era, however, the custom existed of sprinkling the foundations of any important building with human blood, in order to assure its solidity. On the west of the province of Connaught a remarkable idol "*Cromm Dubn*" was found, and after the conversion of the Island they celebrated its destruction by a festival held on the first Sunday in August.

"*Kermond Kelstach*" a stone statue presided over the destiny of Ulster, just as "*Cromm Cruach*" raised in the "plain of Adoration" was supposed to protect the whole of Ireland. The stone pillars, too, which marked the limits of a property, were objects of veneration which recalled that of the Romans for the god *Terminus*. One also hears of stones uttering oracles and of others from which musical sounds

issued forth. Some warriors used even to venerate their arms.

The worship of the elements was not rendered to the element itself, but to the supernatural being which was supposed to inhabit it. For the rest, this worship was a matter of individuals, families and tribes, that used to choose the object of their special worship. There were no temples; the altars were raised in the open air, and were very little frequented.

All these details lead us to conclude that in Pagan Ireland there existed no organised religion, no official religious teaching. There were few, if any, forms of prayer; the morality was of necessity vague, and religious influence on Irish manners seems to have been null. Life was without any hope of immortality, doubtless there was belief in a land of eternal happiness, and this was inhabited by spiritual and immortal beings, but men, save those chosen and carried off by the fairies, had no place there.

## **V**

This vague form of religion was called Druidism, and the Druids were its official representatives. But what we know of the Gallic Druids must not be applied to the Irish.

In Gaul, they held meetings, and were governed by a supreme chief; they taught the immortality of the soul, and offered human sacrifices; they were priests, and observed profound secrecy as to their mysteries and ceremonies, and their disciples were forbidden to write. Nothing of this existed in the organisation of the Irish Druids. These were before all wise men and magicians. They were held in high honour as judges, prophets, historians, and poets, and they alone were allowed to speak in public; besides which they

were especially venerated for their magic powers, and feared on account of the wonders they could perform. They had access to kings, advised them, and were appointed tutors to their children, but the kings never identified themselves with them. The Irish Druids not forming a caste, did not constitute any force which could be utilised by the royal power, nor did they represent any religious force, which on account of its doctrine and morals might have proved a serious obstacle to the evangelisation of Ireland.

If we may say so, all Saint Patrick's efforts were chiefly engaged in combating their magical powers.

The Saint did not deny the power of the Druids, but attributed it to evil spirits; he ascribed his own powers, as a miracle worker, to the God whom he represented, and whose doctrine he taught.

I do not deny that there was a vigorous resistance on the part of Irish paganism to the invading Christianity, but this resistance was less powerful than in other countries, because in Ireland the pagan priesthood was not an organised body. I think, as far as one may hazard a conjecture on this subject, that the chief difficulty which Christianity encountered, was to get its precise dogmas and its mysteries accepted by minds that had hitherto existed tranquilly without any religious ideas, and by hearts which felt no need of a God.

## **VI**

The physical aspect of the country into which Saint Patrick penetrated differed considerably from the Ireland of today. The land was then chiefly covered by vast forests which were separated by bogs, and these marshy tracts were

overgrown by rushes, which concealed the swamps and added to their danger.

Still in the midst of the forests were open spaces which had been cleared and cultivated, and on the hillsides were seen traces of man's labour.

These clearings were protected, sometimes by banks of earth or of dry stone, at others by a fence formed of stakes placed at intervals of about twenty centimetres, bound together by withies, and surmounted by a quickset hedge.

Behind these enclosures were the dwellings or huts, round or oval in form; some like beehive cells, some built of mortared stone, which when clustered together formed the village. The sheds for the sheep and calves, and the pig-styes were close to the dwellings, while the oxen and horses were left free to graze in the neighbouring field.

The country inhabited by a tribe was protected by a fort or dun, with a triple rampart of dry stones, heaped together, while many upright stones were placed in front and served to break the onset of an enemy's attack.

Still, travellers found no difficulty in going from one place to another, as there were paths everywhere, besides the routes in which waggons drawn by oxen were continually passing.

Five high roads led to Tara; and there were also others.

The Irish did not live isolated from the rest of the world, they were hardy adventurers and formidable pirates, and owing to their incursions into Great Britain, many Christians were brought into Ireland as captives; such was the fate of Saint Patrick and his household.

The Irish carried on a brisk trade; their ports, especially that of Wicklow, were much frequented. Roman geographers used to locate Ireland half way between Spain and Brittany. The error is evident, but does it not show that vessels leaving for Spanish ports, usually took the direction of Ireland? Her trade with the Roman Empire is mentioned by the historian Tacitus.

In the second century the geographer Ptolemy gave a description of the island founded on authentic data. Unfortunately it is almost impossible to decipher this document owing to the gradual change of names in the places mentioned.

Ireland had regular intercourse with the southwest of Great Britain. Many colonies of British merchants had settled in the south of Ireland, and had thus opened the road to commerce and wealth. In this way too, Christianity had already entered, when Saint Patrick landed there as an Apostle, in 432.

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These general considerations as to the probability of the existence of Christian settlements in Ireland, before the mission of Saint Patrick, are warranted by clear and positive evidence. The only fact for it suffices on which I insist, is taken from Saint Prosper's Chronicle. In the year 431, he writes, "Palladius, ordained by Pope Celestine, was sent as first Bishop to the Scots believing in Christ." It is therefore, evident that Christian communities were existing in Ireland before 431, and were demanding a bishop. Even supposing that the words "in Christum credentes" were not found in the text, Saint Prosper's phrase would still prove this. In fact, if Ireland had been entirely Pagan, Rome would have sent a missionary, and not appointed a bishop.

Some members of these Irish communities were drawn to the intellectual centres of the Roman world, especially to Gaul. For instance, Fith, better known under the name of Isernius, was at Auxerre at the same time as Saint Patrick, and was ordained by Bishop Amator.

We possess the names of a certain number of these saints living before Saint Patrick's time: their lives are full of legends which render them useless as regards history, but they are based on incidents taken from local traditions. However trivial may be these incidents, however little may remain after they have been submitted to a searching criticism, still we know that the persons, to whom they relate, actually lived in the south of Ireland.

This serves to explain why Saint Patrick confined his apostolic action to the north and west of Ireland. His presence in the south was less necessary, because, for more than a century perhaps, flourishing Christian communities had already existed there.

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But to return to Bishop Palladius. His death, which shortly occurred, put an end to his mission. It appears that his sojourn in the County of Wicklow was a brief and troubled one.

The arrival of an official representative of a religion which was already spreading in the country, and which doubtless counted some of its adherents among those immediately surrounding the Ardri or sovereign king of Ireland, called forth a determined resistance on the part of the pagan Druids.

Their action had triumphed in the case of Niall, and they now succeeded in influencing Laeghaire (Lear), they

reminded him of the solemn promise he had made to his father, never to renounce the religion of his ancestors, they also repeated to him such prophetic warnings as the following:

There will come by sea a tonsured, man,  
With a hooded cloak and bent stick,  
His table will be at the east of the house,  
All his family will respond; Amen, Amen.

"When these things come to pass, our pagan kingdom will disappear."

Such were the sombre predictions by which according to Muirchu the Druids persuaded Laeghaire to repulse Saint Patrick. It is probable that the prophecy was made after the event, but it is also certain that the missions of Saint Patrick and Palladius encountered a strong opposition.

The messenger of Saint Celestine was only able to establish three churches in the region where he landed: at *Cell Fine*, at *Techna Roman* and at *Domnach Arte*.

At the end of a year Palladius died, by all accounts very much discouraged. Having given up all hope of evangelising Ireland, he had passed over to the Scots of Scotland, and was on the point of returning to Rome, when he was overtaken by death.

Thus we may say that the evangelisation and Christian organisation of Ireland still remained to be realised.



# **Birth of Saint Patrick - His Captivity - His Flight - His Sojourn at Lerins**

I

Saint Patrick was born in Great Britain, probably in the year 389. His father was a deacon named Calpurnius ("Confession," chapter 1). We learn from Muirchu that the name of Patrick's mother was Conchessa, and he tells us that she was of Prankish race, and related to Saint Martin. We have no reason to doubt these details.

The gloss of the "Hymn of Fiacc" and the "Sixth Life," which professes to give us information as to the parentage and ancestors of Saint Patrick, are not reliable. At most, we can only gather that some of the Saint's sisters were taken captives like himself to Ireland, and that one of them was called Lupita.

The fact that Potitus and Calpurnius were in Holy Orders, and yet were married, need not cause us much surprise. These two men lived in the time of transition, before the rule of ecclesiastical celibacy was universally admitted. It was in 385 that Pope Siricius wrote his "Decretal" establishing the necessity of celibacy. And much later, at the Councils held in Gaul it was judged necessary to legislate against those ecclesiastics who had married.

The parents of Saint Patrick belonged to the middle class, they were free, and therefore citizens. The head of the family held a municipal office, being a decurion ("Epistle against Coroticus," 10). This honour weighed heavily on all who bore it, and all kinds of efforts were made to escape it, but the

Roman Government took precautions to render this impossible.

Under the reigns of Diocletian and of Constantine (284-327), in order to repair the disorders of the preceding century, people were taxed to the utmost. The land was divided into different taxable unities, while a personal tax was created which was imposed on all those who were not land-owners; thus there was a special tax for the army, the post, and for all who held office under the Empire.

The charges were certainly not too excessive as regards the tax-payers' means, but complaints were everywhere directed against the manner in which the tax was levied. And above all against the rapacity of the fiscal officers.

The aristocracy, by raising small armies on their estates, defended themselves by force against the Imperial tax-collectors, or else they bargained with them and confiscated to their own profit the greater part of the reductions conceded. People of humbler condition had one means of escaping the land tax, which was to sell their land to the members of the aristocracy, and to become simply "colons."

There still remained their personal tax; but the masters were responsible for them, and I have just explained how the aristocracy managed to obtain a reduction from the official collectors.

Thus the middle-class became the taxable part of the Empire. Every owner of at least thirteen acres was honoured by the title of decurion, and he thus became the prey of the fisc. Not only had the decurions to pay their personal taxes, but as the amount of taxes for the city was fixed by the officers, the decurions were made the assessors, collectors, and sureties of the State dues.

This system was extremely convenient for the Government, but it constituted a danger to society. The decurions had only one desire, which was to change their position. Some succeeded by being elected as Senators, but this was the exception.

For the greater number the dignity of decurion was a prison from which there was no escape. They were surrounded by a network of laws. They were forbidden to live outside the town, to alienate, sell, or will away any of their property; while the son was obliged to succeed to his father's office. The members themselves belonging to this class took good care that no one should escape; for the defection of one member increased the expenses of the others.

Little by little the middle-class proprietor ceased to exist. There was, however, one way of escaping from the toils, which was to take Orders; in this way one might avoid the civil duties of the decurion's office. Was it not probably for this reason that we find Potitus a priest and Calpurnius a deacon?

It may be so; and yet a law of Theodosius the Great had fixed a date, after which those decurions who had taken Orders, were not on that account to be exempt from their civic duties. Perhaps both Potitus and Calpurnius had found it possible to combine their ecclesiastical and lay offices.

In any case they were left in possession of their property, and this would have been impossible if they had refused to discharge their obligations to the State, by not paying the taxes levied on their lands.

But Patrick did otherwise; he "bartered his nobility," though this caused him "neither shame nor repentance" (Ep.

chapter 10), for he had acted in the interests of others, having become the servant of Christ in a foreign nation.

## II

Patrick's childhood and youth were spent in the place where he was no doubt born, a village called Bennaven Taberniae, near which his father had a farm. (Conf. I) The birthplace of Saint Patrick has not yet been identified, we only know of one Bannaventa which is situated near Daventry in Northamptonshire. But this cannot have been his native place, which according to authentic tradition was near the Irish Sea.

The majority of Saint Patrick's biographers (Haddan, Todd, Whitley Stokes, Father Morris, M. Bernard, etc.), following the most ancient commentator of Saint Fiacc's Hymn, identify Bannaventa with Alcuith, near Dumbarton, on the estuary of the Clyde. Thus Patrick would have been born in Scotland. But the great difficulty attached to this supposition is, that the Roman organisation had not penetrated perhaps so far north, and we have seen that the family of Patrick was firmly attached to the organisation of the Empire.

Mr Bury thinks that Saint Patrick's birthplace should be sought on the banks of the estuary of the Severn, in Glamorganshire, where one has found three places named Bauwen, which might represent Bannaventa.

I should be rather inclined to identify the Saint's country with the mysterious Banna near Carlisle. This was in the neighbourhood of the Picts' Wall, on the boundaries of the province of Valentia, which Theodosius re-organised in 369.

According to this conjecture one may easily see how the father and grandfather of Patrick might succeed in combining their offices as decurions and ecclesiastics. In

fact, in these reconstituted colonies Rome showed herself less exacting than in those parts of the Empire which were nearer to the centre.

Calpurnius called his son by a Latin name, Patricius, which in Irish became Cothrige. Succat which must be translated by "warlike," was his British name. The Lives give us a third; Magonus often contracted into Maun signifying "active."

### III

We have no authentic information respecting the childhood and education of the Saint. But legend has abundantly filled this void by multiplying the miracles of Patrick's youth. The Saint's baptism was accompanied by a triple wonder; a stream gushed forth from the earth, the blind priest, who baptized the infant, recovered his sight, and this man who had never known his letters was able to read the baptismal office.

The Saint was put in charge of a nurse; this woman's dwelling was the scene of repeated miracles.

One day the house was inundated, and the child began crying for food. "We have something else to do than to prepare your meals," said the nurse hastily; "and, besides, there is no fire in the house." On hearing these words the boy began looking for a spot where the water had not yet penetrated, and, having plunged his hand into the torrent, sparkling drops, which kindled a miraculous fire, fell from each finger.

One day in the winter, when he was playing with his companions, he collected some icicles, and, full of joy, went indoors and threw them at his nurse's feet. "It would be far better," she grumbled, "if you had brought me something to light a fire with in this cold weather."

"Believe me," said the child gently, "God can make flames burst from these icicles, and change them into burning coals." So saying, he leant over the ice he had brought in, and blew upon it, whereupon a clear sparkling fire burst forth, as if an armful of dry sticks had been thrown on the brazier.

This nurse of Saint Patrick appears in the legends to have been a somewhat disagreeable person, yet the Saint was always as willing to use his power in her favour as she was ready to ask it. Thus the child restored his foster-father to life. The man died suddenly while at an assembly, and the nurse began to upbraid Patrick. "Why," said she, "didst thou let thy father die?" Whereupon the Saint ran to the dead man, and, putting his arms round his neck, embraced him, saying, "Arise, it is time for us to go home." At the child's first word the dead man arose fully restored.

Whenever the nurse found herself in a difficulty, she had recourse to the young miracle-worker. When one of the king's servants came in winter to demand the tribute of butter and curdled milk, at Saint Patrick's prayer the snow which he had collected was changed into milk and butter, and, after the tribute had been presented to the king, again became snow.

Another time when the same servant ordered the furnace in the royal palace to be cleaned, an angel took the place of the child and his nurse and performed the work for them.

Sometimes young Patrick was sent to guard the flocks. Legend shows us him forcing the lions and wolves to bring back the animals they had carried off, and restoring the oxen and sheep to life.

Patrick's sister, Lupita, had been entrusted to the same nurse. One day, when the two children were watching the flocks, they had to separate the lambs from their mothers; while running to perform this task, Lupita fell, striking her head heavily against a stone, and appeared to be mortally wounded. Seeing this, Patrick made the sign of the Cross over the wound. The blood ceased to flow, the wound was healed, and the two children returned to their nurse's home, as if nothing grievous had happened. The scar alone remained, and this, the legend tells us, was necessary, as we shall see later on in another event in which Lupita was concerned.

On referring to what we read in the *Confession* (chapter 1), and on hearing Patrick pronounce his captivity in Ireland to be a punishment inflicted by God, I imagine that when young Patrick had received no serious religious instruction, and yet his father was a deacon. But all is explained if, as I have already suggested, he had simply become a deacon in order to escape, at least partially, from the fiscal consequences of his title of decurion.

## **IV**

We are now approaching the year 405; the affairs of the Roman Empire were not flourishing, and Alaric was attempting a fresh invasion. Honorius had recalled the troops which had been stationed in the west of the Empire, and had concentrated them in Italy, while Stilicon had a legion sent from Britain.

Now, each time that the Roman legions left Britain the Irish pirates hastened to pillage and ravage the country, and to carry off the inhabitants as captives.

Criffon the Great, King of Ireland from 366 to 379, was famed for his incursions. Theodosius hurried to Britain to re-establish order, and for a time there was peace. But Niall, Griffon's successor, was still bolder. At first he was repulsed by Stilicon, but he returned when the Roman general had begun to withdraw his garrisons. This last formidable expedition took place about 404 or 405, and thousands of captives were carried away to Ireland, Patrick being among them. His parents' small estate had been pillaged and the servants dispersed or made prisoners.

Several of the *Lives* say that Calpurnius and Conchessa were killed, but this detail is not exact, as it would be quite incomprehensible that Patrick should have made no mention of it. Probably Calpurnius and Conchessa were away from their farm on this day of plunder. Patrick was sold to a master who sent him to tend his sheep (Conf. 16). He was then about sixteen years of age (Conf. 1). We know very little about this captivity, but what knowledge we have comes from Patrick himself. Thus the information is correct, and enables us to criticise the traditions given us by Tirechan and Muirchu; for the two authors just named do not agree with the *Confession* as to the place of his captivity.

According to the legend, Patrick was sold to a certain Milcho, who lived near Mount Miss, in Ulster. This is in the northern part of the island. While there, Patrick converted the son and the two daughters of his master, who, being very content with his services, wished him to marry in order to keep him in his household. But what was Saint Patrick's astonishment when he recognised in the wife chosen for him his sister Lupita, on account of the scar on her head.

Misfortune changed the disposition of Saint Patrick. He looked upon his exile as a punishment from heaven.



In his *Confession* he tells us: "I was brought captive to Ireland with many thousands of men, as we deserved, for we had forsaken God and had not kept His commandments, and were disobedient to our priests who admonished us for our salvation, and the Lord brought down upon us the anger of His Spirit, and scattered us among the Gentiles, even to the ends of the earth" (Conf. 1). "And there in this place of exile God showed me my unbelief that at length I might remember my iniquities, and turn with my whole heart towards my Lord, my God."

One may easily follow the workings of his mind. He had no great vices to deplore, but seeking for some explanation of his misfortunes, he finds none other than the divine anger, and in what way could he have displeased God, except by his want of fervour.

Patrick desired his freedom and strove to merit it by a more saintly life. He writes: "I was daily tending sheep, and many times in the day I prayed, and more and more loved God, and this faith and fear grew in me, and my spirit was stirred; so that in a single day I have said as many as a hundred prayers, and in the night nearly the same, so that I remained in the woods and upon the mountains, and before the dawn I was called to prayer by the snow, the ice, and the rain, and I did not suffer from them, nor was there any sloth in me, as I see now, because the Spirit was burning within me." (Conf. 15)

Still nothing in all this leads us to suspect what Saint Patrick was afterwards to become. No word in it indicates that he had then any desire or thought respecting his mission.

But by his manner of life he was preparing himself for that outburst of zeal which was later on so powerfully to move his soul. Imperceptibly, as it were, by his ever-increasing love of

God, his heart became that of an Apostle. Later on, when recalling these years, Patrick would perceive more distinctly what had been God's plan for him, and the way by which Providence had led him to the goal; he would gratefully own all the favours which he had received. Hence these days of his captivity would then appear to him as the most important in his life.

At this point of our story the young man appears especially anxious to regain his liberty. He thus narrates his escape: "One night I heard a voice in my sleep saying to me, 'Thou fastest well, thou shalt soon go to thy country.'" (Conf. 17) So we see that he considered that his freedom was a recompense for his holy and penitent life.

And after a short time I heard one saying to me, "Behold thy ship is ready." (Conf. 17)

Patrick immediately resolved to flee, and left the only master he ever had, whom he had served for six years.

He took his way towards the west, to a port of which he had never heard, and "it was not near, but perhaps two hundred miles off;" but continues he: "I went in the power of the Lord, who directed my way for good, and I feared nothing during the rest of my flight." (Conf. 17)

Trial and discipline had ripened the character of this youth. It was a saint who thus fled from the land of his captivity.

This life of prayer and sacrifice generously borne, in order to obtain the grace of deliverance, reveals to us an energetic soul, and a will which never flinched from the end in view. This long captivity also indicates a patient spirit which knows how to wait God's time, and decides nothing except on a clear order from that Providence whose voice may be heard in secret by an attentive soul.

When the desire of his Apostleship first awoke in Saint Patrick's heart, we may foresee the struggles which would result, but, his decision once taken, nothing could arrest this lover of souls. Owing to his captivity Saint Patrick found himself admirably fitted for his future Apostleship; he carried away with him a thorough knowledge of the language, customs, and spirit of the people he was to evangelise.

## V

When the fugitive arrived at the harbour a merchant boat was about to embark with a cargo of dogs. Legend here places a curious incident in Saint Patrick's life. A pagan met the young man as he was fleeing by the most desert paths. He captured him and sold him to the merchants of the same ship to which Saint Patrick (by the Angel's order) was going. The price of this transaction was a large brass cauldron, which the man placed on his shoulders to carry home. On his return he wished to put his burden on the ground, but in spite of all his efforts he could not take it off. His wife, seeing his plight, took hold of the cauldron in both hands, and remained clinging to it. Each member of the family came to their aid and met with the same fate. Thereupon the man understood that he had to do with a man of God, and, overcome by remorse, he returned to the boat, the cauldron attached to his shoulders, and all his family prisoners like himself. When they saw the Saint they began to implore his pity, and so desired to be set free.

From the Confession we borrow more trustworthy details on the subject of the Saint's flight. The merchants absolutely refused to take Saint Patrick with them. The youth returned sadly to the hut where he had found a temporary lodging. "On the way I began praying, and before my prayer was finished, I heard one of the sailors crying loudly after me,

'Come quickly, for the men are calling for thee,' and I at once returned to them," (Conf. 18). These men were pagans; Patrick refused to be adopted by them, but, however, he remained among them in the hope of converting them to the Christian faith. The voyage by sea lasted three days, and was without incident. Muirchu says that the vessel landed in Great Britain; this detail is not exact, for Saint Patrick writes (Conf. 23) that he returned to Britain some years after leaving the sailors.

It was on the French coast that the landing took place, and then began a long march across a desert country. Saint Patrick thus relates: "For twenty-eight days we journeyed through a desert, and their provisions failed, and they suffered greatly from hunger, and one day the master began to say to me, 'What sayest thou, O Christian? Your God is great and all-powerful, why then canst thou not pray for us who are perishing with hunger, and may never see the face of man again?' And I said to them plainly: 'Turn sincerely to the Lord my God, to Whom nothing is impossible, that He may send us food on your way until ye are satisfied, for it abounds everywhere for Him.' And with God's help it was so done, for lo, a herd of swine appeared in the way before our eyes, and they killed many of them, and remained there two nights much refreshed, and their dogs satisfied their hunger." (Conf. 10) The journey lasted two days; God procured them provisions, fire and shelter.

What country did the caravan traverse? Patrick does not tell us. Faithful to the end he proposed, which was to show that God's hand had led him through life, he does not in his *Confession* trouble himself with geographical details. But no doubt they crossed from west to east of the South of France, then ravaged by the barbarians.

In the markets of the South of France and Italy the wolf-hounds of Ireland and great Britain were much sought after. The merchants with whom Patrick travelled were taking over a cargo of these dogs. By carefully avoiding the more frequented routes they no doubt succeeded in reaching Italy. There Patrick left them. On the first night of the journey the fugitive had heard a voice saying: "Thou wilt be with them two months," and so it happened. "On the sixtieth night the Lord took me out of their hands." In the midst of this recital there is an episode somewhat difficult to explain. The night which followed the day on which the caravan had been miraculously fed, owing to the prayer of Saint Patrick, the latter had a dream which he thus relates: "An immense rock seemed to be falling upon me. My limbs were deprived of strength, but how it was I know not, but I began to call out 'Helios,' and at once I saw in the sky a sun rising, to which I was crying 'Helios! Helios!' with all my strength. The splendour of this sun fell upon me and straight way removed all the weight. . . . And again, after many years, I was still a captive. (Conf. 20,21)

What is meant by this captivity? This has evidently perplexed every author; one cannot see in it an allusion to the sixty days spent with the sailors. Mr Bury imagines that the second captivity is an allusion to the years of Saint Patrick's difficult mission in Ireland. This idea appears very ingenious, for Ireland had always been the land of exile for Patrick. While he was living in the company of the merchants, he had the strange dream which we have just read, and the explanation of which seemed very difficult to him. It was only later that he thought he had found the key to the enigma, and connected his dream with his mission.

The recital of the journey with the merchants and that of the dream follow each other, as did the facts to which they referred. But the explanation of the dream did not come to

Saint Patrick till later, when he had returned to Ireland as an Apostle. This he gives in an obscure line: "And again after many years I was made captive," then continues his recital. But soon there is a break in the narrative. "Once more," writes St Patrick, "*after some years* I was in Great Britain" (Conf. 23). Where did the Saint spend these years?

## VI

It is here that Father Morris unhesitatingly places Saint Patrick's visit to Saint Martin. But this opinion is difficult to maintain. If, during these years which preceded his return to Britain, we place Patrick's sojourn at Lerins, we are certainly much nearer the truth. There is no other time than this in the Saint's life for his stay in the celebrated monastery which Honorat had just founded. Now it is certain that Patrick lived at Lerins. The first "Dictum" of Patrick is "the fear of God has been my guide in my journey across Gaul and Italy, and as far as the islands in the Tyrrhenian Sea."

It is known that the ancients understood by these isles the group of small islands which stretches like a chain along the coast of Liguria and Provence. If, on the other hand, we substitute "Terreno" for "Thyrreno," a change which appears to me necessary, the question is still further elucidated.

When Patrick found himself in Italy and free, his first thought was to regain the route to Britain. There was only one, and that was along the coast. In the state of fatigue from which his soul was then suffering, the saint must have longed for a little repose and leisure to reflect on the working of Providence on his behalf, but the liberty which God had just given him back Patrick joyfully sacrificed.

Lerins was then in its first fervour. It sheltered quite a group of great souls and scholars: Hilary, who occupied the see of

Aries, the Abbot Maximus, Lupus, later on Bishop of Troyes, Vincent the learned author, Eucher, and perhaps already the Irish Faustus.

At Lerins Patrick enjoyed the monastic life. Later on, his own existence was not that of a solitary, but he founded many monasteries in Ireland, for monastic life appeared to him, and with reason, as the necessary complement of the Christian organisation of a people.

It was not at Lerins that Patrick felt the first desire of his mission. If it had been so, the *Confession* would have mentioned it, especially as it tells us of the struggles which he was soon to undergo in Britain.

But the Saint had powers within him for which the monastic life offered no scope, and he no doubt felt this vaguely. Patrick quitted Lerins; the will of God called him back to his own people, for it was there that the Lord was to reveal to His servant His purpose concerning him.

# **Saint Patrick in Great Britain - His Stay at Auxerre - Patrick Consecrated Bishop**

**I**

Saint Patrick was warmly welcomed by his family. "Once more," he says, "after some years, I was in Great Britain with my family, who received me as their son, and begged of me now, after all the trials I had undergone, never to leave them again." (Conf. 29)

Patrick was at this time nearly twenty-five years of age. To what would he now devote his life? The cloister was not quite what he desired, and therefore he had quitted Lerins. He was animated by that special charity which dwells in the heart of an Apostle, and he longed to preach the Gospel.

But in what country? His family begged him to remain in Britain, but God's Voice called him elsewhere. His visions were frequent. "I saw in a vision of the night a man named Victor, coming as if from Ireland, with countless letters, and he gave me one of them, and I read the beginning, which was, 'The Voice of Ireland'; and while perusing the beginning of the letter I heard at the same moment the voice of those who were near the western sea, and they cried as by one mouth: 'We entreat thee, holy youth, to come and walk among us.' And I was so moved I could read no more, and then I awoke. Thanks be to God that after so many years the Lord granted their supplication." (Conf. 23)

"And another night, I know not, but God knows, whether it was in me, or by the side of me, in persuasive words that I did not understand till the end of the prayer, he spoke thus:



'He who gave His life for thee is He who speaketh in thy heart.' And thus I awoke full of joy (Conf. 24), and once more I saw him praying in me. I was as if I were inside my body. I heard him praying over me, that is to say, over the inward man, and he prayed duly with groanings, and I was amazed and astonished, and wondered who it was who was praying in me; but at the end of the prayer he said that he was the Spirit, and thus I awoke and remembered what the Apostle said: 'The Spirit Himself aideth our infirmities. And we know not how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit Himself maketh intercession for us with groanings unutterable.' And again: 'The Lord our helper pleadeth for us.'" (Conf. 25)

The words which we have just read are beyond criticism; they will always be obscure to those who refuse to see in the Saints the agents of the Invisible God.

Patrick experienced a violent spiritual crisis. Such a state will always appear exceptional, but it is well known to those who have in any measure the desire of an Apostolate. It becomes very difficult to distinguish between that which is from the grace of God, and that which comes from the desires and inclinations of the man himself. It is only after a period of exaltation, struggle, and hesitation that one finds the calm necessary to make a decision.

One idea possessed Saint Patrick during these days of suspense; he expected from God alone the solution of his doubts. This confidence in God, which enlightens the soul and dictates its duty, is plainly visible in the Confession. For the Confession is a defence or apology, and its chief argument is that the Apostle fears nothing, for the simple reason that he had never sought anything for himself, and that God had visibly led him in all his work.

Let us try and penetrate further into the inner life of Saint Patrick. One may easily suppose that he did not doubt that he was called by God to the work of an evangelist. But it was one thing to consecrate himself to the Lord while still remaining in the midst of his family, and another thing to obey the voice which called him to Ireland.

The heresy of Pelagius was at that time violently disturbing the Church in Britain. This heresy was concerned with a very practical question: Is man born weakened by sin? Can he not gain heaven by his own efforts without the help of grace? Pelagius denied original sin, and taught that man can work out his own salvation without any supernatural help.

There was certainly a violent reaction against this teaching among the true followers of the Church. The more the one side denied the efficacy of grace, the more the others proclaimed its absolute necessity. It was then that Patrick heard the voices of the pagan Irish calling to him, and Tirechan adds a tradition which wonderfully illustrates this. "Patrick used to hear the voices of the children of Ireland, who are still unborn, entreating him to come to them. We can imagine how cruelly the youth would feel the sad fate of those who had not received the baptism of Christ."

Still, Ireland had been the land of his cruel captivity, and Patrick experienced an unspeakable repugnance to return thither. At length he yielded to the supernatural impulse, but after what struggles. "I did not set out for Ireland until I was almost weakened by the combat." (Conf. 28) This internal conflict may have lasted several years, but when heaven had brought the solution, which we have just mentioned, Patrick decided to prepare himself suitably for the mission of which he had dreamed. He left Great Britain with the intention of going to Rome, as he wished to obtain

from that Church, the head of all the churches in the world, "a mission which should give him authority."

## II

Besides all this Patrick knew too that he was unlearned, and that he ought to study. For that reason, no doubt, he stayed at Auxerre, where the school presided over by Bishop Amator had a brilliant reputation.

At that time the relations between Auxerre and Great Britain were very close, and Auxerre was a residence for British and Irish students. In 418 Saint Patrick was ordained deacon by Bishop Amator, on the same day that Auxilius and the Irish Isernius received orders. Patrick remained eleven years at Auxerre. The necessity he was under to study does not explain so long a stay; we must look elsewhere for its cause. This was no other than the difficulty encountered by him in obtaining an authentic mission. He was a man guided by the Divine Will, and for him this Will had to be translated by a formal order from his superiors.

Patrick seems to have found no encouragement from his compatriots, with the exception of his best friend, who later on betrayed him. (Conf. 32)

Neither Amator nor Saint Germanus, who succeeded him at Auxerre, would have authorised Saint Patrick to evangelise Ireland. The friend I have just mentioned had once said to him: "You will see you will be raised to the rank of bishop," and he no doubt tried to aid him when in Great Britain with Saint Germanus, who went there in 429 to preach against the Pelagians. One may easily imagine the representatives of the Christian communities of Ireland coming to Saint Germanus to ask him to give them a bishop. Patrick's friend was present at the interview, and proposed the name of the

Saint, spoke of his ardent wish and of all that seemed to point him out for this mission. But Saint Germanus returned to Auxerre with his deacon Palladius, whom he sent to Saint Celestine, ordering him to put before the latter the demand of the Irish churches. The Pope sent Palladius himself as Bishop to Ireland. Saint Patrick's hopes were again destroyed. Here Mr Bury 1 makes a supposition based on a thorough examination of the text of Muirchu, according to which the events which now took place are perfectly explained.

We have now come to the year 431. Palladius set out at once for Ireland with a great number of missionaries, among whom we find Augustine and Benedict (Muirchu, 8). Patrick must have been charged to organise a second expedition of which he was to take the direction and responsibility. Once landed in Ireland he was to evangelise the country, under the direction of Palladius. Supposing all had been thus carried out, it is during the preparation of Patrick and his companions, forming the rear guard of an important mission, that the unfortunate events took place in the mission of Palladius, to which we have already briefly alluded. The Bishop landed at Wicklow in the county of Nathi, son of Garrchu. The latter opposed the mission of Palladius, who had great difficulty in establishing three churches in the region. The missionary therefore sailed to the Picts of the North. Were they those of Britain or of Ireland? Muirchu's text contradicts itself. It is usually said that Palladius, much discouraged, went to the Picts of Britain, in order to return from thence to Gaul.

But it is more probable that the Apostle tried to plant the Gospel among other tribes of Ireland, and that he was going towards the north of the Island, when he was overtaken by death.

### III

Patrick heard of his death from Augustine and Benedict, the companions of Palladius. Some say he went with Segetius to Rome, others say to Ireland, and I think that the latter are right, for it is probable that those who carried the news of Palladius's death met Patrick on his way to Ireland rather than that they rejoined him on the way to Rome. The meeting was at a place not identified; Muirchu calls it Ebmorea. Patrick, instead of continuing his journey, turned aside to be consecrated bishop.

Some authors, anxious to connect the Church of Ireland with Rome, wish to say that the Apostle was ordained bishop by Pope Celestine. This is a detail which older documents do not give. The consecration of Patrick by the Pope would have added nothing to the character of his mission. Patrick knew as well as all the Faithful of that time that the Pope alone could receive the Irish Church into the fold of Christianity. This had been sufficiently proclaimed by the fact of the mission, confided to Palladius. The first bishop of Ireland is certainly Palladius and not Patrick. It mattered little where the successors of Palladius were ordained, they had to be consecrated in the most convenient place and at the most fitting time. On hearing of the death of Palladius, Patrick retraced his steps to Auxerre where he was ordained bishop by Saint Germanus. The Apostle again set forth to Ireland, and landed in Wicklow in 432, which Palladius had reached in the previous year.

# Missionary Journeys of Saint Patrick

The general impression which one has on reading the accounts of Tirechan and Muirchu is that of the prodigious activity of Ireland's Apostle. Tirechan enumerates a hundred churches established by Saint Patrick, and many other foundations were due to his zeal, for we thrice read in the Collectanea: "Patrick established a great number of churches in the region."

Shearman, and those who have followed him in his special kind of work, have not succeeded in identifying all the names given by Tirechan. It is thus quite impossible to state with absolute certainty the parts visited by Saint Patrick. It is also impossible to obtain a very exact chronology of his missionary journeys, and to fix the order in which they were undertaken. The statements of Muirchu and Tirechan are contradictory.

The first makes the Saint, after landing in Wicklow, at the mouth of the river Dee, again return northward by sea. Patrick then lands on the shores of the Slain, a narrow canal which connects Lough Strangford with the sea. His motive is to carry to Milcho his former master the sum of money with which he might have ransomed himself, and also to convert him. On his way the Apostle converts Dichu. After this journey in Ulidia (Ulster) Patrick returns to the mouth of the Boyne, traverses the plain of Breg, and reaches Tara. Muirchu here places a long recital of Saint Patrick's first celebration of Easter in Ireland. He then makes him return to the kingdom of Oriel; there the Apostle founds the church of Armagh.

This is all the information furnished by Muirchu, which he probably had from Armagh itself. These details were

sufficient to make known in the South, where Milcho resided, both the church, and the Apostle whose presence was venerated throughout. None of the old communities of the South possessed such miraculous histories as those which came from Armagh. On the other hand, Saint Patrick having visited the communities in Leinster and Munster, there was no need for Muirchu to relate facts which were already known in his neighbourhood.

Tirechan gives us far more ample details of the legends of Saint Patrick. Scarcely, he tells us, had he landed at Wicklow than the Apostle again set sail for the north, as far as an island, where he spent the night, and which has since been named after him, Inis Patraic. He then penetrates into the plain of Breg, and traverses the whole of Meath. Tirechan afterwards gives at length a long account of his Apostolate in Connaught, makes Patrick return towards Milcho in Ulster, then to Oriel, and again to Meath, and lastly terminates by an allusion to the foundation in the South. In this period of the Saint's life there are two facts to which we may assign exact dates: his visit to Rome, and a journey in Connaught.

Patrick's visit to Rome is related in the annals of Ulster in the year 441. Armagh was afterwards founded as the result of this journey, probably in 443. Saint Patrick's mission in the South was certainly later than the foundation of Armagh.

One of the Apostle's journeys in Connaught was made in the company of Endeus, after the death of Amolngaid. This king of Connaught died about the year 444.

The expedition during which Patrick reached the north-west confines of the forest of Foclut could not then have taken place till the year 445, or shortly afterwards.

By making use of these dates, and carefully studying the account given by Tirechan, it seems that we may succeed in reconstituting, in a fairly satisfactory manner, the missionary life of Saint Patrick. A preliminary remark is here necessary.

Tirechan has insisted on the evangelisation of Connaught. He certainly follows no order in his account of Saint Patrick's labours in this part. Mr Bury supposes there were three journeys of Saint Patrick in Connaught, and he gives proofs in favour of the itinerary which he has traced; in any case he is certainly right in his assertion that the Apostle returned several times to visit the churches he had founded; this we may see from the writing of Tirechan himself.

Having made these preliminary remarks, the following conjectures as to the order of Saint Patrick's Apostolic labours seem probable.

It appears to me impossible that Saint Patrick on landing at Wicklow should have failed to visit the churches founded by Palladius, and the few Christians who were living in the country of Nathi, the son of Garrchu. Nathi, as one has already seen, had opposed the missionary enterprise of Palladius; doubtless then he did not show himself more favourable to Saint Patrick. The latter, therefore, sought another ground for his Apostolate. The biographers have not mentioned this unsuccessful attempt; it would have detracted nothing from his glory, but neither would it have added to it. But Nathi's opposition prevented the Apostle from landing and penetrating farther into other districts of Ireland.

Like Palladius, Saint Patrick sailed farther north and landed in Meath. After evangelising this country the Saint undertook other missionary journeys in Connaught. Passing by the south of the forest of Foclut he reached Mount



Cruachan Aighle, then, retracing his steps, he traversed Meath, in order to go by sea to Ulster, then once more returned to Meath.

After his journey to Rome Saint Patrick founded the church of Armagh, then, returning to Tara, he went on to evangelise the most distant part of Connaught. He afterwards visited the bishops and the Christian settlements in the South, undertook another journey to Connaught and Meath, in the course of which he made fresh foundations and revisited the churches already established; he then returned to watch over the community of Armagh. It was no doubt during these years that the attacks were made which decided the Apostle on writing his *Confession*. Towards 457 he resigned his office, and was succeeded by Benignus. The preceding remarks show the order which will be followed in this chapter. One will find in it no fresh chronological indications, but only the story of Saint Patrick's missionary labours in the different kingdoms of Ireland.

## **I - Apostolate in Meath**

We meet with the name of Benignus, Saint Patrick's successor, in the government of the church of Armagh, at the very commencement of the Apostle's ministry. The latter had just reached the mouth of the river Ailbine (now Delvine); there he found a man well-disposed towards him, whom he baptized, and whose hospitality he accepted for the night. This man had a son, and on the morrow, when the Saint was about to depart, the child begged to accompany him.

Patrick baptized him, and consented to take him. "He will be," said he, "the heir to my kingdom." The saint called the boy Benignus because of his affectionate disposition.

Meath was the land inhabited by the Ardri or chief king of Ireland; what we already know of the social and political organisation of the island leads us to think that Patrick wished us to ascertain the sentiments of the monarch towards Christianity. This king was Laeghaire, a son of Niall. He could not have been ignorant of the new religion, with which, for more than a hundred years, Rome had been reconciled.

Even though there were no Christian settlements in his kingdom, still the relations which Laeghaire had with the Emperor would have taught him that Christianity, the official religion of the Roman people, was each day gaining ground, and that in taking its place by the side of the ancient forms of pagan worship the new religion was, by degrees, superseding them.

We have, besides, positive proof that Laeghaire knew something of Christianity. His conversation with Saint Patrick ended with this declaration: "My father Niall did not allow me to believe, but made me promise to be buried with my arms, like our ancestors, on the Hill of Tara." (Tirechan, 12) If Laeghaire did not desire for his own sake to embrace Patrick's religion, what liberty would he be likely to give the Apostle to preach Christianity?

The Druids urged the king to drive the missionary away, they predicted the downfall of his power, bound up as it was with the ancient religion. It was doubtless only after much hesitation that Laeghaire decided to conclude a treaty with Patrick, whereby the king, though still remaining a pagan, agreed to protect the Apostle throughout the territory subject to his authority. But how far did this protection extend? Probably not far, since we see that the brothers of Laeghaire, sub-kings of Meath, made an attempt upon the

Saint's life. In any case it must have been ineffectual in the South, with which Laeghaire was often at war.

Indeed Laeghaire appears to have been of a sceptical turn of mind; witness as he was of the struggles between Patrick and the Druids, the holiness of the former did not succeed in converting him, while, on the other hand, he was not sufficiently attached to paganism to defend it by force as the Druids advised him to do. Still he did not imitate his father Niall, but left his sons at liberty, as is proved by a passage in the *Additional Notes to Tirechan's Memoirs*. There we are told that Fedilmid, the son of Laeghaire, had settled at the ford on the river Boyne. One of Patrick's companions, Lomman, went as far as this ford. In the morning Fotcheran, the youngest of Fedilmid's sons, found Lomman there reading the Bible. He drew near to the stranger, who began to instruct the child; the latter believed and was baptized, and remained with Lomman till his mother went to seek him. She was also instructed and baptized, and then went back and related all to her husband, who himself came and was converted with all his house. He confided his son to Lomman, and gave Saint Patrick the land of Trim.

Before continuing the narrative of Saint Patrick's labours in Meath we must stop at the interesting account given by Muirchu of the first Easter festival celebrated by Saint Patrick in Ireland. In it we have a proof of the fierce struggle waged between the Druids and the Apostle, and all the efforts they made to persuade the sovereign of the country to take violent measures against the new religion. Legend enters largely into the story; still we must believe that legends do not create either figures or characters, but are grafted upon them. That which shines forth conspicuously from the pages of Muirchu, which we are about to translate, is the holiness of Patrick, his courage, and his fearless

readiness to use his miraculous power in opposing the magical arts of the Druids.

On Easter eve, Saint Patrick arrived at a place now called Slane, on the right bank of the Boyne; on the opposite shore, some miles towards the south, rose the hill of Tara, the palace of Laeghaire, who, on the occasion of a great pagan solemnity, had assembled round him a number of his magicians, Druids and priests; for in the same night, when Saint Patrick was celebrating Easter, these Druids were also keeping their festival.

It was the custom among them, consecrated by an edict, that whoever dared make a fire that night before one appeared in the royal dwelling of Tara should suffer death.

Saint Patrick then prepared to celebrate the great feast of Easter and lighted the paschal fire about night-fall. The sparks shone far away, and were perceived by all the inhabitants of the plain. They were also seen at Tara, and consternation was general. The chiefs and elders of the people, being consulted, declared themselves ignorant of the author of the crime; and the Druids thus addressed the king: "Oh, King, live for ever! If this fire that we see, which has been lighted this night before thine in the Palace of Tara, is not extinguished, it will never be so, moreover it will overpower all your fires; he who kindled it will vanquish us all, and will bring about the downfall of thy kingdom; he will become all powerful and will reign eternally."

Like Herod of old, Laeghaire was very troubled by these words, and all in Tara shared his fears. He answered, "It shall not be thus; we will go and see what will happen; we will seize the guilty ones and put them to death."

Nine chariots were then yoked, according to tradition, and the king, taking with him his two most celebrated magicians, Lucetmael and Lochru, left Tara at daybreak. On the way the two Druids said to him, "You shall not go as far as the place where the fire is, lest you salute him who has kindled it, but you shall stay near; the guilty one shall be summoned that he may salute you, and thus you shall then overcome him; we will speak, and he himself shall speak in your presence, thus you shall judge between us." The king answered, "It is wise counsel, I will do as you say."

They arrived at the place, dismounted, but did not go as far as where the fire was lighted, but seated themselves near (Conf. 15).

Saint Patrick, on being summoned, at once rose, and went towards the king, and when he saw all these chariots and horses he began chanting the appropriate verse from the psalms: "Some trust in chariots, and some in horses, but we call upon the name of the Lord our God."

None dared rise, save one, as the Saint approached, this was Here the son of Dego. Patrick blessed him and he believed in God; his relics are now honoured at Slane.

At the commencement of the discussion the magician named Lochru attacked the Christian faith. Saint Patrick, casting on him an angry glance, as did Saint Peter of old on Simon Magus, prayed aloud: "Lord God Almighty, Who hast all things in thy power, Who hast sent me here, may this blasphemer be now taken up in the air, and perish." At these words the Druid ascended into the air, and immediately fell, dashing his brains upon a huge stone; all the Pagans were seized with fear. (Conf. 16)

The infuriated king wished to kill Saint Patrick and exclaimed, "Seize this man who will destroy us." But Patrick, rising in defence, intoned the Psalm:

"Let God arise and let His enemies be scattered,  
and let them that hate Him flee before His face."

Whereupon an earthquake shook the ground, and the Pagans, panic stricken, turned their spears against each other, while those who escaped fled to the mountain of Monduirn. The king persisted in his evil design, but a fresh miracle from Patrick caused him to return in fear and trembling to Tara. (Conf. 17)

On the following day, the king being at table in his palace, surrounded by his chieftains and Druids, and all the doors being shut, Patrick appeared as before. Only two of those present stood up and saluted the Saint. One was Dubtach the poet, whose disciple, the young Fiacc, became Bishop of Sletty. Patrick was invited to share the king's repast, and accepted. (Conf. 18)

During the meal the magician Lucetmael, who had witnessed all that occurred on the previous evening, resolved to avenge the death of his colleague, and commenced by pouring something from a vessel which he bore into the cups of all those present, then waited to see what the Saint would do. "The latter, perceiving this, made the sign of the Cross over his cup before all those assembled; the contents were at once frozen, and Patrick, taking it up, caused the poison which the magician had put in to fall through. He again blessed the cup, and the ale in it was as usual; all present were amazed.

"Shortly afterwards the magician proposed to adjourn to a vast plain, challenging the Saint to work miracles there. He

offered to cover the earth with snow, while Patrick answered that he would do nothing contrary to the will of God. The Druid then by his incantations and magic spells brought snow upon the ground, up to men's girdles; this marvel filled all who witnessed it with amazement.

"The Saint said to the magician, 'Now make the snow disappear.'

"'I cannot,' he replied, 'till the same hour tomorrow.'

"'Thou canst do evil,' said Patrick, 'but thou art unable to do good; with me it is otherwise.' The Saint then blessed the plain and in less time than it takes to tell, without any clouds or rain, the snow disappeared. This miracle astonished those present, and at heart they admired Patrick.

"Soon after this, the Druid, having invoked the demons, brought darkness over the plain, and all murmured. Patrick told him to dispel it, but he was unable to do so. Whereupon the Saint prayed, and blessed the plain, and suddenly a bright sun dispersed the darkness, and all began exclaiming, and thanking him.

"The king then said to them both, 'Throw your books into the water, and we will submit to the one whose books come out undamaged from the river.'

"'I will do so,' said Patrick.

"'I do not consent to this trial,' said the magician, 'for this man honours the water as his God.' He had certainly heard of Saint Patrick baptizing with water.

"The king replied, 'Throw them into the fire.'

"I am willing," said Patrick, but the magician again protested, saying, 'This man worships sometimes fire and sometimes water, according to his fears.'

"The Saint then proposed that one of his servants should be shut up in the house with the magician, 'Thou shalt wear my tunic and he will wear thine, and at the same time fire shall be put to the house.'

"This proof was agreed upon and the hut was then made, one half being of green branches and the other half of dry faggots. The Druid then entered the house of green wood, and the youth Benignus was shut up in the dry part, the door was closed and fastened, and fire applied to it in the presence of the crowd; and it happened through Patrick's prayers that the part where the Druid was, was entirely consumed, whilst none of the Saint's tunic was burnt. Benignus, like the three young men in the fiery furnace, was untouched by the flames, as was that part of the house he was in, but the magician's tunic was entirely destroyed.

"The king, mad with anger at the death of his magician, tried to kill the Saint, but God did not permit it. At Saint Patrick's prayer the divine wrath fell on the people and many of them perished. The king was filled with fear and all the town shared in his terror." (Conf. 20)

Though Patrick did not succeed in converting Laeghaire, we know that the latter offered no further opposition to the evangelisation of the country. Besides which the sub-kings were independent enough to think and act otherwise than the sovereign, even though they were related to him by ties of blood.

At Teltown, where the public games were held each year, Cairbre, one of Laeghaire's brothers, wished to kill Patrick;



he did not succeed, but he treated the Saint's followers cruelly, the latter cursed him and foretold that his brother Conall should reign over his children. Conall, in fact, welcomed the Saint with joy, was converted, and granted him a site for a church, which was called Donagh Patrick.

While following the course of the Seele Patrick arrived at the ford of Cenondale where he founded a church. The ruins are there shown of a stone house, a Christian relic which recalls the name of Saint Colomba. It was from there that the celebrated monk set out to convert Scotland a century after Saint Patrick's time.

At Uisnech, on a hill which is considered as the centre of the island, the Apostle met Mac-Fechach, a grandson of Niall. Mac-Fechach showed himself more cruel than Cairbre, and succeeded in killing several of Patrick's servants, who cursed him for these crimes. A stone, called the stone of Cothrige (Patrick), long preserved the name of the Saint, and the visit he had made to this spot.

Uisnech was actually in the country of Tethbias, which was divided into two parts by the river Eithne. Patrick made his way to the north of the river to a spot called Cell Raithin (now Granard), where he ordered one of his disciples to build a monastery. It was there that Gosact, the son of Milcho, lived, whom Patrick had known during his captivity.

There existed in Ireland a custom by which the chief families used to exchange their children: in this way, no doubt, Milcho had confided his son to Patrick's master. Mr Bury thinks in this supposition to find the key to the mystery of the invention of Patrick's captivity to Milcho. Besides it would not be astonishing if, yielding to Gosact's desire, the Apostle penetrated into Ulidia (Ulster), as far as the dwelling of Milcho, in order to try and convert him.

If this enterprise had succeeded, a considerable breach would have been effected in the pagan populations in the north of the island. We shall later on find this episode related at length in the Apostolic life of Saint Patrick.

\* \* \*

From Granard, still pursuing his course towards the north, the Apostle arrived at the plain of Slecht, celebrated for the worship of a huge stone idol covered with gold and silver, called Crom Cruach.

In the Fourth Life we read that twelve other idols, ornamented with brass, surrounded it. The king and all the people adored this statue in which was hidden a dangerous demon, which was consulted as an oracle.

Patrick, after having evangelised the country and founded several churches, had acquired sufficient authority to perpetrate a bold act. "He went to the spot where the idol stood, and raising 'the staff of Jesus,' which he held in his right hand, he threatened to break the head of the statue. The demon which was inside it, fearing the Saint, made the stone turn to the right; but the staff did not leave Patrick's hand, and the mark of it is still seen on the left side of the statue. At the same instant the earth swallowed up the other twelve idols to their heads, and they are still in that condition, in commemoration of the miracle."

"By Saint Patrick's order the demon which inhabited the statue showed itself to the eyes of King Laeghaire and the assembled crowd. All the people besought the Saint to deliver them from the evil spirit, whereupon Patrick ordered it to descend to the eternal abyss." (Vita quarta. Conf. 53)

This legend has a certain significance; if this idol were really the object of veneration throughout Ireland, and if the

sovereign himself used to come each year to adore it, this act of Saint Patrick's would symbolise the definite triumph of Christianity in Ireland.

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Tirechan gives us the names of a certain number of other churches established in Meath, but it is impossible to identify these foundations. We have nothing left of them save the name. This is why I need not insist on the fact that we cannot follow the itinerary of Saint Patrick in Meath. I have already said that the foundations of Meath must be referred to many separate journeys of the Apostle. Whether he went to Connaught in the west or to Munster in the south, he used to return to the places he had first evangelised, and we must suppose that if he loved to revisit the churches he had founded, he certainly would not fail to explore these parts of the country which were still pagan.

The energy and activity of Saint Patrick are already clearly manifested; the episode of Tara gives a striking proof both of his confidence in God and of his power in working miracles.

## **II - Evangelisation of Connaught**

The appeal of the children from the forest of Foclut had often re-echoed in Saint Patrick's heart, and we know that it was this which decided him to devote his life to missionary work. I imagine that the Apostle early strove to penetrate into this region of his captivity, and he must have spent a certain number of years in its evangelisation. The *Tripartite Life* speaks of seven years of preaching, and mentions that Patrick crossed the Shannon three times. Tirechan confuses all the events in the evangelisation of Connaught, and connects them with one single journey, which, as we have already observed, is quite impossible.

Remembering the detail given in the *Tripartite Life* let us consider that the labours of Saint Patrick in Connaught extended over three distinct journeys.

\* \* \*

Tirechan relates the ordination of Ailbe at Duma-Graid, and tells us that Patrick, when sending the new bishop to govern the church at Senchua, revealed to him the existence of a stone altar, having four glass chalices at the four corners; thus the land of the sons of Ailill, where Senchua was, had been already visited by Patrick. Other missionaries had preceded him in this region, or how otherwise can we explain the existence of this marvellous altar? Consequently we must admit that the Apostle had at first tried to penetrate into the forest of Foclut by going towards the north, and in the course of this journey must be included the foundations of the churches of Aghanagh, Echanach, Cell Angle, and Cell Senchuae.

Still continuing his way towards the north he drew near the coast, and established Bishop Bron at Caisselire. The Apostle had now reached the frontier of the land of Amolngaid. It is impossible to say why he did not go beyond. One may here suppose that Patrick retraced his steps, but more probably he skirted the forest of Foclut, always trying to penetrate it, and from there turning first to the east, then to the south, he arrived at the very place of his captivity, having evangelised on his way the lands of Ciarrigi, and Carra, and founded the great church of Ached Fobuir, where the consecration of bishops was afterwards held.

If Patrick really revisited the scenes of his captivity, one may imagine with what deep emotion his soul was filled. The goal was reached, the dream which had decided his vocation was realised. But the Apostle had first traversed parts of the

country which were entirely heathen. With the appeal of the children of Foclut were mingled the supplications of the children of the whole of Ireland, and his apostolic fervour became deeper and more vivid. It was not only one corner of the earth which he desired to evangelise, it was a whole region which offered itself to his zeal, and which claimed his labours.

Patrick in the presence of these familiar scenes would recall the days spent in prayer and fasting; for if salvation had come to Foclut, was it not because it was there he had suffered and prayed?

And therefore he was filled with an intense desire for solitude, and going towards Mount Aighle (Croagh Patrick) he ascended it alone.

There, like our Lord, he fasted and prayed for forty days; and he prayed especially for Ireland, which he had just evangelised.

God granted the request of His servant and wished to give him a proof that the task he had undertaken should redound to his glory. "To the saints of times past, to those of the present, and to those of the future," God said: "Ascend, O my Saints, to the neighbouring mountain to the highest of those which are in the west, and blessed be the people of Ireland."

"Now all these souls in the form of large birds flew to the summit of the mountain, and their number was so great that the daylight was obscured, thus God consoled Patrick by showing him the fruit of his labours." (Tirechan, chapter 38)

The forest of Foclut had hitherto remained closed to Saint Patrick, but a providential event admitted him to the

farthest confines of this mysterious region; this was during his second mission to Connaught.

Patrick was sojourning at Tara. He overheard by chance a conversation between two noblemen; one said, "Is it true that you left your home a year ago, and only arrived here a few days since? Tell me your name, I beg you, also that of your father, and his land, his tribe, and where you dwell." The other answered, "I am Endeus, the son of Amolngaid, I come from the shores of the west, from the tribe of Domnon in the forest of Foclut."

On hearing this name Patrick was filled with joy, and said to Endeus, "I will go with you, if I am living, for God commands me to set forth."

Endeus replied, "You shall not accompany me for fear lest we both be put to death."

"You say truly," said Saint Patrick. "You will never return to your country alive, if I do not accompany you, and you will not have eternal life. It is because of me that you have come here, like Joseph going before the sons of Israel."

Endeus answered, "Baptize my son; he is still young, but I and my brothers cannot believe in you, before we have returned among our own people, otherwise they will scoff at us." Then Conall, son of Endeus, was baptized.

The seven sons of Amolngaid had come to ask Laeghaire to decide about their father's heritage. Judgment was given by Laeghaire and Patrick, who ordered the lands of Amolngaid to be divided into seven parts. (Tirechan, chapter 14,15)

Endeus immediately gave up his part of the inheritance to Patrick. The latter, accompanied by the generous donor, set forth in the direction of Foclut. On the way the travellers

passed Moy, and soon entered the country of Amolngaid. The news of Saint Patrick's approach quickly spread, and no doubt it was remembered how ten years previously he had attempted, but unsuccessfully, to penetrate the country. A multitude of the pagan priests assembled to oppose his entrance; at their head was the chief magician named Recraid, who tried to kill Patrick. He approached him, with nine other Druids clad in white and pronouncing incantations. The Apostle had just baptized a number of persons, when Endeus and Conall perceived the magicians. Endeus seized his weapons, and, advancing towards them, was about to drive them back, when Patrick interposed. Lifting his left hand to heaven, he cursed Recraid, who fell dead in the midst of the group, while the others fled in consternation. This miracle resulted in the conversion of a great number. A church was erected on the confines of the forest, close to the sea, and Mucneus was left in charge of it.

Patrick, while continuing his route, encountered the other sons of Amolngaid at a place called Foirrgea (Killala), and founded a church there also. The forest was distant and there was no wood, so they built a square church with earth instead.

The details we have of the third journey in Connaught are much more numerous and precise. The Apostle stopped first of all at Duma-Graid. In the plain of Roscommon, he erected a great church at Cell More and passed on to the plain of Glass. There he was received by an influential Druid named Hono, with him were Assicus and Biteus, who were already Christians.

Hono welcomed Patrick with joy, and was easily persuaded to help in the foundation of a monastery and church; these were erected at Elphin. Patrick blessed Hono, and prophesied that his family would live and furnish Elphin with

its spiritual and temporal chiefs. Assicus was consecrated Bishop and remained at Elphin. He was a goldsmith, and in Tirechan's time admirable specimens of his work might be found among the treasures of several churches, and notably among those of Armagh.

In the course of this journey Saint Patrick revisited the Christians whom he had baptized in the plain of Airthrice, and in the country of Ciarrigi; it was when going there that he stayed at Selce, where he baptized the sons of Brian; the names of two bishops, seven priests, and two women who accompanied Patrick are there engraven on three stones dedicated to our Saviour Jesus Christ.

The Apostle also stopped at Rath Crochan, a country rich in legends, which was the burial-place of some of the famous kings of Ireland, such as Dathi. Saint Patrick's stay in this spot is marked by an extraordinary event which must be related, for it sheds a new light on the Apostle's character.

Patrick and his disciples were seated at daybreak near a fountain, when the two daughters of Laeghaire, Ethne the Fair, and Fieldelm the Ruddy, came there to bathe, as they were wont to do; when they found the synod of clerics grouped around Patrick, they could not tell from whence they came, nor who they were, nor the tribe or country to which they belonged, but they took them for spirits, and imagined they were some of the *fir-sidhe*. They asked them: "Whence are you and whither have you come?"

Patrick answered: "It would be better for you to believe in our God than to ask us concerning our race."

The elder girl said: "Who is your God, and in what place is He? Has He sons and daughters? Has He gold and silver? Is He ever-living? Is He beautiful? Has His Son many



daughters, beautiful and admired? Is He in Heaven, or on the earth, or in the streams, or in the rivers, or in the valleys or mountains? Teach us about Him. How may we see Him? Can we find Him in youth or in age?"

Then Patrick, full of the Holy Ghost, responded: "Our God is the God of all, the God of heaven and earth, the God of the seas, the God of the sun and the moon and of the planets, the God of the high hills and the low valleys, God over heaven, in heaven, and under heaven. He inspireth all things, quickeneth all things, surpasseth all things, sustaineth all things. He giveth light to the sun and the moon, and maketh the stars. He created fountains in the dry land, and placed dry islands in the sea, and stars to minister to greater lights. He hath a Son co-eternal and co-equal with Himself; the Son is not younger than the Father nor is the Father older than the Son. And the Holy Ghost is in the midst of them. Nor is the Father, nor the Son, nor the Holy Ghost divided. I desire, moreover, to unite you to the heavenly King, for ye are daughters of an earthly king; only believe."

And the daughters said, as if with one mouth and heart: "Teach us that we may see the Lord face to face, teach us and we will do as you tell us."

Saint Patrick answered: "Do you believe that through baptism the sin of your fathers shall be put away from you?"

"We believe it."

"Do you believe in repentance after sin?"

"We believe."

"Do you believe in life after death and in one church?"

"We believe."

Then they were baptized, and a white veil was put on their heads, and they desired to see Christ face to face. And the Saint said to them: "Ye cannot see Christ except that you first taste death, and unless you receive the body of Christ and His blood."

And the maidens replied, saying: "Give us the Communion that we may be able to see the Son, our Spouse. After this they received the Communion and fell asleep in death" (Conf. 26).

Now the death of these young maidens drew forth such lamentations from their companions that one of the two Druids, to whom their father had entrusted the education of Ethne and Fieldelm, hastened to the spot. The name of this Druid was Caplait; he listened to the teaching of Patrick, was converted, and received the tonsure. The other priest named Maël followed in his turn; he at first resisted, but at length believed Patrick's teaching and also received the tonsure. Hence the proverb, "Maël est comme Ca Plait."

This history rests on undeniable historic facts. We have several accounts of it, and the tomb of the two daughters of Laeghaire was really near the fountain of Cruachan. Yet we instinctively feel that much of the story is artificial. It is arranged to lead up to an exposition of Christian faith. But the baptismal questions, which Patrick put to the young girls, indicate a far greater knowledge of the Faith than they could have possessed from the brief instruction of the Saint. Still this story affords us two precious sources of information.

As the legend was certainly composed at least for the generation which came after the death of the Apostle, we know first what questions were put at this period to those who were baptized, before admitting them to the Sacrament, and probably what questions Patrick used

himself to put. In the second place, we are made aware that the Saint, from the very commencement of his preaching, dwelt upon the mystery of the Divine Essence; the Trinity Itself. We shall see later on the reason for this.

### **III - Saint Patrick in Ulster**

Muirchu has followed a tradition of Ulidia, or Ulster, by which Saint Patrick is said to have begun his Apostolate in Ireland by the evangelisation of Armagh. This tradition undoubtedly has its birth in Armagh. The principal church in Ireland was not established till a dozen years after the arrival of Saint Patrick. It could not then claim to be the first fruits of his labours, but if the neighbouring country had been the first Irish soil evangelised by Patrick its glory would have shed a lustre on Armagh. The Apostle, it is said, had first cast his eyes on Ulster, and later on had made it the centre of his action. Had Palladius died among the Picts of Ireland, and not in Great Britain, it seems quite natural that the new bishop would think of first going to the north in order to console the Christian communities there who were mourning the death of their founder, and also to venerate the tomb of this missionary. But would not this pious intention have been noticed by Saint Patrick's biographers?

Again, the desire of converting Milcho, his ancient master, might have decided Patrick to undertake this voyage in Ulster, but Patrick was not the slave of Milcho. The episode of Milcho has a meaning which we will shortly try to determine. There is one reason which explains better than anything else the Ulidian tradition.

It is in Ulidia that Saint Patrick died, and Ulidia kept the corpse of the Apostle. Was it not natural then to identify the land first traversed by him as that in which he was awaiting his resurrection?

If one follows Muirchu, and wishes absolutely to prove that a journey to Ulster took place in 432, we must allow that it was of short duration, since the first Easter festival celebrated by Saint Patrick in Ireland was at Tara in Meath. Of course it is possible that he made many Apostolic journeys in Ulster, and in one of them might have followed this itinerary. Starting from one of the islands of the Fils de Cer (Inis Patriacc) he passed the mouth of the Boyne, went beyond the mountainous shores of Conaille, and, entering the canal which joins Lough Strangford, landed at the spot where the river Slaney flows into the lake.

This was in a low-lying plain, which was easily covered by the sea, and where the inhabitants had made salt marshes. The travellers, having left their boat in shelter, went farther on into the country. They followed the banks of the river Quoile, walking towards the west trying to find a convenient spot where they could remain. They were seen by a swineherd, who was in the service of a man, naturally well-disposed, named Dichu. Taking them to be robbers the servant ran to warn his master, who came with an armed force ready to defend his property, but perceiving Patrick, and touched by the grace of God, the fierce Pagan became like a lamb. Dichu was the first Scot converted by Patrick. He was not the chief of his tribe, yet he was able to give up a portion of his land on which a barn was erected that served as a church, and which was called Sabhall from the Latin Stabulum. The word Sabhall has become Saul, and it is this form we shall use to designate this spot. In the neighbouring country the influence of Rus, the brother of Dichu, was supreme. He allowed Patrick to build a church upon his land in a place called Brechton. Bishop Learn governed this settlement; Tassach was bishop of a third church at Rathcolpa.

These are the only geographical names of places in Ulster which we have been able to identify and to which successful labours of Saint Patrick may be attached. If we must believe Muirchu, the evangelisation of Ulster was a simple accident in the life of Patrick, whose chief design in penetrating into this country was the conversion of Milcho.

One cannot refuse to believe that Saint Patrick's view was more elevated and apostolic. It is possible that he went northwards in Ulster to the dwelling of Milcho, thus fulfilling a promise which, as we have already seen, was made to Gosact, but the Apostle's real object was the evangelisation of the country. The task was not so easy, nor the result so triumphant as a hasty perusal of Muirchu might lead one to believe.

We do not find the name of any tribal chief converted by Patrick, and three of the episodes related by Muirchu lead us to suppose that he encountered a violent and systematic opposition from the chiefs, and brutal and obstinate ill-will on the part of the people.

The name of Milcho recurs several times in this history. Muirchu thus relates the end of Patrick's former master: "Milcho having learnt that Patrick was on his way to convert him swore that he would never submit to his former slave. Inspired by the demon he went into his royal house with his gold and silver, set it on fire, and was burned with all his treasures."

From a spot marked by a cross, and now called Croagh Patrick the Saint perceived the flames lighted by Milcho on the hillside of Mount Miss. At this spectacle the Apostle was filled with astonishment. He remained silent two or three hours; at last he exclaimed, sighing and weeping: "God knows, I do not, if this king, rather than be converted and

serve the Eternal God, chose to perish in the flames, and if his kingdom will not be taken away from his sons, and if his sons will not become subject to another king." (Muirchu, chapter 11)

That Milcho was really an historic personage cannot be doubted. But there is no connection between his refusal to believe and his suicide. Legend has made use of his name, and has made him the type of those chiefs in Ulster who preferred to perish eternally with their riches rather than sacrifice to the true God. The flames which arose from the sides of Mount Miss remind us of the flames of hell, which engulf the wicked with their wealth, and with which Patrick threatened all those who were deaf to the voice of truth.

MacCuil is another type of these incredulous chiefs. He was an incarnation of violence and cunning, but, more fortunate than Milcho, he was converted. He was one of those violent and cruel tyrants, intemperate in language and manner, given over to evil deeds, and without conscience, so many of whom must have then been found in Ireland.

At first he had been touched by the holiness and miraculous power of Saint Patrick, then he had done violence to his feelings, and meditated killing the Apostle, and to encourage the bandits in his service who feared the Saint, he had recourse to the following ruse:

He ordered one of his party to lie down and feign sickness. Patrick was then called. "One of us," they told the Saint, "has been taken ill. Pray come and sing over him some of your incantations, so that he may be restored to health."

Saint Patrick, knowing their deceit, replied that, "No wonder the man was really sick," and when they came and raised the coverlet they found the impostor really dead. Struck

with terror MacCuil was converted, and when he had been baptized he enquired of the Saint what penance he was to do for his sins.

We have already made an allusion to Saint Patrick's answer: "I am not able to judge, but God Himself will judge thee. Do you therefore now depart, unarmed, to the sea, and pass over quickly from this country, Ireland, taking nothing of your own except a small common garment, with which you may be able to cover your body, eating nothing, and drinking nothing of the fruit of this island, having a mark of your sins on your forehead; and when you reach the sea, bind your feet together with an iron fetter, and cast the key of it into the sea, and set out in a boat of one hide, without rudder or oar, and wherever the wind and sea shall lead you be prepared to remain, and to whatever land Providence shall carry you, be prepared to live there, and obey the divine commands."

And MacCuil answered: "I will do as you have said, but respecting this dead man, what shall we do?"

And Patrick replied: "He shall live and rise again without pain!" And Patrick restored him to life in that hour, and he revived quite sound.

MacCuil kept his promise; the wind from the north blew him upon an island named Evonica (Isle of Man). He found there two men, celebrated for their faith and learning, who were evangelising the inhabitants of the island; their names were Conindri and Rumili. On seeing this man, who had only one garment, they were at first astonished, then taking pity on him they took him out of the boat. MacCuil became much attached to these spiritual fathers in the country whither God had guided him; he followed the rule they imposed on him, and dwelt with these two bishops until their death,

when he was made bishop in their place." (Muirchu, chapter 22)

As I have said, the people themselves were no better than their masters; they did not fear to rob the Apostle, and one of his neighbours stole three of his oxen, but misfortune overtook him. Patrick cursed him, and the lands of this thief were immediately covered by the sea.

They often used to scoff at his exhortations, like those workmen who one Sunday were digging the trench of an earthwork. Patrick vainly entreated them to cease, they contented themselves with mocking and insulting him, the Saint threatened them with the anger of God. Now in the night a tempest arose and the waves destroyed all the work of the Pagans. (Muirchu, chapters 23,25)

One day three robbers stole one of the goats from the Apostle's flock and ate it. They were discovered and Patrick had them brought before him and questioned them. As they were affirming their innocence with oaths, the animal itself bore witness against them, and from the bowels of the three men, one heard a voice saying: "Because you will not own your fault to my master I will show myself." The thieves remained stupefied, and, on Saint Patrick's questioning them, declared that nothing remained of the goat save its head. "A man of your race," said the Saint, "will henceforth have a goat's head."

On another occasion some men from Ulidia brought Patrick some poisoned cheeses. He at once changed them into stones, and went farther on; these men, having failed in their criminal attempt, mounted their horses in pursuit of the Saint. They saw him just as he had crossed a ford, and plunged after him into the river. At that moment Patrick turned round. "You can neither go forwards nor backwards,"



he said to them, "you will remain in this river to the end of the world." And so it was; the men who perished at this spot were fifty in number. (Vita Quarta. Conf. 73,74)

From these legends of Ulidia we may justly conclude that all the north of Ulster long remained inaccessible to Patrick, and that the conversion of the inhabitants of " the Island Plain" was very difficult, but still they had been much impressed by the Saint's personality. We must not pay too much attention to the revengeful character which is shown in a certain number of these legends concerning Saint Patrick. This is not an isolated case. It is really admirable that all the miracles recorded in the Gospel are beneficent. This may be taken as a proof that the Gospels, faithful records of the acts of God, are also divinely inspired histories. When it depends on man alone, things are shown under a different aspect; those who have written the lives of the Saints have often allowed their own personal views and judgments to influence their work. Notably, at a certain epoch, biographers were too prone to think that fear is the commencement of wisdom and of the love of God. But true religion, and the actions of the Saints, whose lives they related, were certainly inspired by other sentiments.

#### **IV - Saint Patrick at Armagh - He Visits the South of Ireland**

In 441, after nine years' apostolate Saint Patrick was able to see the result of his labours and form some opinion of the future of Christianity in the Island which he had adopted for his own country.

He had preached to kings, lived among tribes which were still heathen, and established churches and monasteries in their territory. The kings themselves, with the exception of a few chiefs, were still attached to the ancient Celtic religion,

but full of respect and astonishment, they had protected the Apostle's life, and had left him perfect freedom of action.

The Plain of Meath had been the scene of surprising marvels. The idol of Magh-Slecht was overthrown; in the West the Druids of Amolngaid had plotted against the Apostle, but the mysterious forest of Foclut was now surrounded by a circle of churches. In his mission to Ulster, he had met with many difficulties, but it had been a fruitful one, at least in the south of the province. Oriel would seem to have been an easy conquest because of King Daire's presence there. The South had long since been evangelised. Patrick was perhaps unable to make a stay here, or had not thought it necessary. The appeal of the heathen had stirred his soul, and he had hastened towards those tribes whose misfortunes he knew and commiserated.

One thought must have always been present to Patrick's mind. Brought up in Gaul he shared the opinions of the bishops of Gaul as to the relations of the churches with the See of Rome. Thus he desired to obtain from Rome the seal and consecration of his labours.

For Patrick easily perceived how much greater his authority would then be vis-a-vis the pagan king, the bishops whom he consecrated and the bishops in the south, who, until now, could pride themselves on a mission similar to his own, and whose Churches possessed the privilege of seniority over those of the north. After a short absence, he hoped to reappear in Ireland as a pilgrim from Rome, blessed by the Pope, and bringing the precious relics, as a badge of his office, confided to him by the Supreme Bishop of that Church which is termed the "Mother of all the Churches."

It is not to be supposed that any thought of personal ambition was in the Saint's mind, so simple and so entirely

was he a man of God one who had a very humble opinion of himself, as the Confession plainly shows us.

But in going to Rome Saint Patrick realised a long-formed design. He would try to obtain the Primacy for a See which the Pope would let him choose. Now this was simply to claim for Ireland the same ecclesiastical organisation which existed throughout the Christian world.

Saint Patrick's journey to Rome must have taken place between 441 and 442. It was successful. The Apostle returned with a supply of moral force, which he greatly needed, for criticisms and difficulties had reached him, even from the churches he had founded. He brought back, too, the precious relics of Saint Peter and Saint Paul. This was the best proof of the welcome accorded him by the Pope Saint Leo. For what prestige would not these relics give both to Saint Patrick and to the Church he was about to establish as the Metropolitan See of Ireland? This was Armagh, near the hill of Ardd Macha in the kingdom of Oriel.

Nothing, from a political point of view, decided Patrick in giving Armagh the primacy over the other episcopal sees; nothing in the course of history has caused one to attribute to this see an authority that certainly Patrick would not have desired. Doubtless the thought which guided the Apostle's decision was that Daire, the king of the country, was a Christian, whereas Laeghaire and Amolngaid, the kings of the South, had refused to embrace the Christian Faith. Then, too, the new community liberally endowed by Daire had developed splendidly. Lastly, Armagh was a convenient centre for Patrick, whose apostolic zeal was chiefly exercised in the North of Ireland.

When Patrick arrived at the foot of the hill of Ardd Macha, King Oriel allowed him to settle on a small plot of ground to

the east, only forty feet in diameter. The Saint erected on it a large wooden house for the monks, with a kitchen and little oratory attached.

The Tripartite Life gives us the dimensions of the building; the house was twenty seven feet long, the kitchen seventeen, the oratory seven. Later on, and in the circumstances we are about to relate, Daire gave up the whole of the hill to Patrick.

One of Daire's servants led his master's horse to graze in the field of the Christians. Patrick complained: "Daire acts badly in sending his horses to trouble the humble pasture he gave to God." But the servant would neither listen nor answer the Saint's protest, and he left the horse free to graze all night long. When he returned next morning it was dead.

The servant went back full of sorrow to his master, and said: "This Christian has killed your horse, because he was angry at its being in his field."

"Let him die also," answered Daire, and he ordered his servants to go and kill Patrick.

When they had gone to obey this order Daire was seized with a mortal sickness. His wife said to him: "It is the fault of this Christian; let some one hasten to him and implore his prayers, and thou wilt be saved; and let them prevent those who have gone to kill him." Two men ran in haste to Patrick, and without telling him what Daire had commanded. "Our master," they said, "is grievously ill, give us something that may cure him."

Patrick, knowing all that had happened, blessed some water and gave it to the messengers, saying, "Go throw some of this water over your horse, and take the rest with you." They obeyed, and the horse came back to life, and then entering

Daire's house the servants sprinkled some of the water over the prince, who was at once restored to perfect health.

Daire then came to thank Saint Patrick, bringing with him a wonderful vase which held three firkins, and he said to the Saint: "Lo, this vase is thine."

"Gratzacham" (Deo gratias), answered Patrick.

When Daire had returned to his own home he said, "This man is a fool, for he said nothing for a wonderful vase but 'gratzacham' and he ordered his servants to go and bring back the vase he had offered, and they went and told Patrick, 'We must take away the vase Daire gave thee.'"

"The Apostle only replied gratzacham, take it."

When the servants got back, Daire asked them what the Christian had said; "Nothing else but gratzacham," they answered. Daire was so struck with the Saint's gentleness in thus thanking them, whether they brought him a present or took it away, that he himself went, and again offered the vase to Saint Patrick, saying, "This vase shall now remain with thee, for thou art a steady and imperturbable man. Moreover, that portion of land which thou didst desire before, I now give thee, as fully as I have it, and dwell thou there"; and this is the city which is now named Ardd Macha (Armagh) (Muirchu, chapter 24)

Such is the legend of the foundation of Armagh.

The kingdom of Ailech and the north of Ulster were also evangelised by Saint Patrick. He chose the site of the church at Coleraine; at Dun Lebuirgi, a stone is shown on which he sat by the seashore; in the land of Condiri, Glenavy and Glenarn also claim the Apostle as their founder, like Glogher in Tyrone, and Ard Patrick in Oriel. But ancient histories only

mention this mission in general terms. No doubt other and fuller accounts existed which have been lost.

It was after his journey to Rome and the foundation of Armagh that Patrick visited the south of Ireland.

He traversed it less as a missionary founding churches than as a superior visiting and encouraging the Christian communities already established there, ordaining bishops and appointing them over the different churches. Moreover, Tirechan's account of this journey through the kingdoms of Leinster and Munster is very brief. The *Additional Notes* and the *Tripartite Life* give us rather more information and attribute to Patrick the baptism of the sons of Dunlang, King of Leinster, of those of Crimthann, King of Hy Ceiselach, and lastly of the sons of Nathraich, in their father's palace at Cashel.

In the south the Apostle again met with Auxilius and Isernius, his former companions. They had, not without great difficulty, evangelised Leinster of which they were natives. They had been obliged to struggle against Endeus, who seems to have played the same preponderant role in the south as Laeghaire in the north.

For Endeus had shown himself an active enemy of the new faith; and on several occasions Isernius had been forced to retire before him and to change the site of his churches and monasteries.

Now Crimthann was the son of Endeus, and Patrick seems in baptizing him to have reaped the fruit of the toilsome labours of Auxilius and Isernius.

In the south Patrick also met Fiacc, the disciple of the poet Dubtach and a poet himself; he appointed him bishop at Domnach Feic; Fiacc became later on Bishop of Sletty.

Lastly we must refer to this journey in Leinster, the letter to the Irish clergy drawn up and signed by Patrick, Isernius, and Auxilius; we shall soon have to speak of it again.  
(chapter 8)

# The Apostle

The apostolic labours of Saint Patrick lasted for a quarter of a century. We have no precise information as to his work in Ulster; we have shown that no date could be assigned to the foundations mentioned by Tirechan in Meath and Connaught.

Even admitting that a certain number of churches have erred in claiming Saint Patrick as their founder, there still remains to his account a vast field of labour, which was miraculously fruitful.

Having related the outward life of the Apostle, I now wish to analyse his inner self, and to bring into relief the moral forces which serve to explain a life so full of good works and creative energy.

The Saint's biographers in the Middle Ages have clearly seen the supernatural character of his enterprises. But in relating them they have introduced too much that is purely legendary, in which the miraculous element preponderates.

In the preceding chapter, I pointed out the character of these miracles, and I also remarked that we ought to see in them a general tendency of the minds of the epoch in which they were - I do not say altogether invented - but at least strangely perverted.

Saint Patrick, like all energetic men, was bold and enterprising; his heart was full of sublime faith which often made him resolve on an unexpected course of action. The legendary facts with which his daring ventures are so inextricably confused are like those which in the Middle Ages were attributed to the Saints, and we need not attach



too much credence to them. But the further we retrace our steps the purer, if I may say so, do the biographies of Saint Patrick become. Muirchu, as well as Tirechan, deserves our confidence, and whenever they speak of a miracle it is certain that Saint Patrick performed one. We cannot say they were absolutely such as related by these two writers, but we must admit that the holiness and prayers of Saint Patrick triumphed supernaturally over human wickedness and diabolic power. It would be absolutely puerile to eliminate from his history all those events in which human power seems to have its limits; the intervention of Providence in human affairs is certain and undeniable and therefore belongs to history. Thus Tirechan and Muirchu may aid us in understanding something of Saint Patrick's soul, but it is on the writings of the saint himself that we shall principally found our observations.

I

Patrick was in the prime of life when he went over to Ireland to become its Apostle. He knew both the manners and constitution of the country, we can then be certain that he would not begin his work without having foreseen and ordered everything.

The Mission was entirely organised by Patrick. Palladius reached Ireland with a few missionaries, and we can easily imagine that the Apostle was accompanied by others. In any case we find that with him in Ireland was a group of priests, deacons, and nuns. They came from Britain and Gaul.

In each church which the Apostle erected, he left one or two priests.

Even supposing that a native clergy was soon formed, the first foundations were certainly governed by the persons

Patrick had brought with him.

The name of one of these churches in Connaught clearly shows the presence of priests from Gaul, among Patrick's followers. Baslic is not an Irish name, it is derived from the Latin "basilica."

If we admit that Patrick was on his way to join Palladius in Ireland when he heard of the death of Celestine's envoy, the material organisation of the mission under his direction had already lasted a year.

In this case Palladius would have set out for the country which Celestine had given him to evangelise, counting on the material help that Patrick was to bring him later on. The bishop thought he had taken sufficient provisions for at least a year; he was to lay the foundations of some Christian institutions which were afterwards to be completed and endowed.

When Bede tells us of Saint Augustine's departure for Britain, he thus describes the preparations for that expedition. "The Missionaries carried with them all that was necessary for the worship and ceremonies in the churches, naturally the sacred vessels, ornaments for the altars and churches, the ecclesiastical and sacerdotal vestments and the relics of Saints, Apostles, and Martyrs, as well as many of the sacred books" (Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 1,29)

Do not our missionaries act in the same manner today? Patrick could not be less provident, and therefore he took some wealth with him.

He would ask the kings to act liberally towards him, and he wished, in his turn, to be generous. And this he was. "From time to time I gave presents to the kings." (Conf. 52) "I spent for you as far as I was able; and among you, and everywhere

for you, I endured many perils in distant places, where none had been further, or had ever come to baptize or ordain the clergy or confirm the people." (Conf. 51) To this fortune, which was no doubt partly the result of the generosity of the church at Auxerre, Patrick added his own personal property. He sacrificed his position in the Roman administration and "he bartered his nobility for the good of others." (Conf. 37)

One chief mark of his Apostleship was its being absolutely gratuitous. He knew the Irish customs which governed the ownership of land. One reason above all others made him decide that his mission should be without any hope of material reward. "Unbelievers," he said, "might employ me otherwise than in my ministry so I might not give them any occasion to defame or detract it." (Conf. 49)

If the Christian brethren, the virgins of Christ, the devout women, freely gave him gifts, and cast their ornaments upon the altar, the Apostle returned them. (Conf. 49)

This astonished and even scandalised the donors. But the fear of their displeasure made no difference to Saint Patrick, he knew it would pass, and even were it not so, the Saint would have preferred it to the risk of astonishing the infidels by accepting presents.

He always paid for services rendered him. "You know," he says, "how much I expended in the districts I visited most frequently. For I think I paid not less than the hire of fifteen men that you might have the benefit of my presence, and that I might always enjoy you in the Lord. I do not regret it, nor is it sufficient for me; I still spend and will spend" (for your souls) (Conf. 53).

He was thus able to challenge his enemies, and he continues: "When it happened that I baptized so many

thousand men, did I expect even half a 'Screpall' from them? Tell me and I will return it to you. Or when the Lord ordained clergy through my humility and ministry did I not confer the grace gratuitously? If I asked of any of them even the value of my shoe, tell me, and I will repay you more." (Conf. 50)

We must not forget that in relating these things the holy Apostle was defending himself against those who, jealous of his success, accused him of having sought his own glory and interest. But he could not have foreseen such attacks, and if he had made the Christian conquest of Ireland with so much generosity, it was that he had really organised everything so that the evangelisation might be accomplished in an entirely disinterested manner.

We have here a proof of his robust good sense, and of the clear view he took of realities. The visions and dreams of which we have already spoken might make one believe he had the temperament of a weak-minded and fanatical person. In reality Saint Patrick was anything but a visionary, and the moment has come to penetrate, as far as he permits us, into the secrets of his soul.

## II

Had the Apostle been more impulsive, he would have immediately responded to the appeal which he heard in the depths of his heart. But we have seen Patrick's hesitation and struggles, when, after his return to Britain, he heard the entreaties of the "children from the Forest of Foclut." Was it, he asked, really certain that God wanted him in Ireland?

A less prudent man than the Apostle would have expected more from the grace of God, and would not perhaps have resolved to spend so many years in the School of Auxerre to instruct himself in human science, to throw off his

ignorance, and to force, so to say, the voice of God to speak clearly to him and draw him irresistibly.

In one word, a less prudent man than the Apostle would have been impatient to begin his work, he would have hurried over the intervening stages, while Saint Patrick strove to prolong them.

The Saint might affirm, without fear of contradiction, that he had not promptly followed what was shown him and what the Spirit suggested, that he had not at once recognised the grace that was in him in the midst of his doubts and uncertainties. (Conf. 46)

If one might reproach him for anything, it would not be for having sought the honour of being an Apostle, but rather for having delayed to undertake the work he ought to have done sooner.

Patrick was a man of faith, he trusted implicitly in God and ascribed all honour to Him. "Whence," says he, "came this wisdom which was not in me, who neither knew God nor the number of my days? Whence did I afterwards obtain the great and salutary gift to know and love God and to leave my country and my relations?" (Conf. 36)

Who would dare to reproach him with coming to Ireland to spread his nets for God, and how can one accuse him of labouring for his own glory?

"Did I come to Ireland according to God or according to the flesh? Who compelled me? I was led by the spirit, that I should see my relatives no more. Have I not a pious mercy towards that nation which formerly took me captive, and plundered the servants of my father's house?" (Ep. 10)

The will of God had brought him back to Ireland and it kept him there. "Therefore, though I could have wished to leave them, and had been ready and very desirous to go to Great Britain as to my country and parents, and not that alone, but to go even to Gaul, to visit my brethren, and see the face of my Lord's Saints; and God knows that I desired it greatly. But I am bound in the spirit, and He who witnesses will account me guilty if I do it, and I fear to lose the labour which I have commenced and it is not I but the Lord Christ, who commanded me to come and be with them for the rest of my life; if the Lord grants it, and keeps me from every way, that I should not sin before Him." (Conf. 43)

Nothing could detain the Apostle to whom God had manifested His will, neither the entreaties of his parents, nor the mockery and insults of his enemies.

They might reproach him with his rusticity. Was it fit that one so incapable as he should undertake the great work of an Apostle? Patrick admitted all this, but he also notes his success. He was feeble and unworthy; but it was God who was powerful and merciful. Patrick never thought that a false humility ought to make him conceal the fruitfulness of his labours. Sanctity does not consist in ignoring our moral and intellectual powers, but in recognising and discovering and using them, and then in referring all to God, begging Him to correct our weakness and supply our deficiency. Sanctity then consists both in external and internal action. Let us ask no one, save Patrick, about his success. "He baptized thousands" (Conf. 14,50). He could not enumerate the number of those whom he had brought to Christ. (Ep. 16)

### III

No nation is really Christian if her soil does not bring forth Apostles and penitents. Now one sees "that the sons of the

Irish and the daughters of kings became monks and virgins of Christ" (Conf. 41, Ep. 12). And the Apostle tells how God gave him grace, "so that everywhere should be ordained priests for this people newly come to the faith, which the Lord took from the ends of the earth" (Conf. 40). "It would be too long to detail my labours particularly or even partially. I will briefly say how the good God often delivered me from slavery and from twelve perils by which my soul was threatened, besides many snares and what in words I cannot express, and with which I will not trouble my readers. But God knows all things, even before they come to pass, as the Divine Voice often admonished me though a poor and ignorant child." (Conf. 35)

#### **IV**

Thus in his sincere humility the Apostle reveals the secret work of grace in his soul. He does not seek "to hide the signs and marvels which God revealed to him many years before they took place." This avowal does not redound to his own glory, it is rather a proof of the goodness and indulgence of God: "Who am I, O Lord? or what is my calling, that divine grace should have so wrought with me? so that today I can so rejoice amongst the nations, and magnify Thy name not only in prosperity but also in adversity, and I ought to receive equally whatever happens to me, whether good or evil, giving God thanks in all things, who hath shown me that I should undoubtingly, without ceasing, believe in Him who hath heard me, though I am ignorant, and that I should undertake, in those days, so pious and wonderful a work, and imitate those of whom our Lord predicted of old that they should preach his Gospel to all nations for a testimony before the end of the world; which has been accomplished as we have seen. Behold we are witnesses that the Gospel has been preached to the limits of human habitation." (Conf. 34)

\* \* \*

Who am I, Lord? And one knows the answer, as we have just heard that this Apostle could not be frightened by dangers nor turned aside from his work by any power which was not divine. Neither violence nor the thefts of which he was a victim ever shook his faith or cast down his courage (Conf. 37,52,55). He knew "with a certain knowledge that poverty and misfortune suited him better than riches and pleasure." He feared nothing for he was in the hands of Almighty God.

So firm had been his faith, he had shown himself so faithful to the truth, he had been so sincere and so upright in all things that he did not fear lest the name of the Lord should be blasphemed through him (Conf. 48).

One last trait which puts the crowning touch to the moral beauty of the Apostle is his desire to die for those whom he had won for Christ. We give his own words: "If I have done anything good for my God, whom I love, I beseech Him to grant to me that with those proselytes and captives I may pour out my blood for His name even if my body should be denied burial, and be miserably torn limb from limb by dogs or fierce beasts, or that the birds of heaven should devour it." (Conf. 59)

The death of Saint Odran proves that Patrick must have several times miraculously escaped death. A noble named Folge boasted of his intention of killing the Saint in order to revenge himself for the destruction of an idol which he cherished. These threats came to the ears of Patrick's companions; but they were careful not to warn their master. One day when the Saint was passing in the neighbourhood of Folge's dwelling, his charioteer said to him, "I have long been your driver, be mine today." Now Odran knew that Folge was lying in wait for Patrick in order to kill him. Patrick



humbly assented and took the reins while Odran entered the carriage. At a certain spot Folge appeared, and thrust his lance through the body of him whom he took for Patrick.

## V

There is one side of Saint Patrick's inner life on which all his biographers have specially dwelt: this was his diligence in prayer. The subject of the second part of the Life written by Muirchu is precisely "Patrick's diligence in prayer." Each day, says Muirchu, he sang or recited all the psalms, the hymns, the Apocalypse of Saint John and all the spiritual songs in our writings, whether he was journeying or not. At each hour of the day he made the sign of the cross a hundred times, and when he encountered a cross on his way he descended from his chariot to prostrate himself before it." (I,II, chapter 1) It is easy to interpret these words in their true sense; the piety of Saint Patrick edified all who knew him, his soul held habitual converse with God. It was from prayer that he drew both his inspiration and his strength, it is through prayer that he converted souls.

True we might expect this Apostle to have been a man of prayer. Apostleship is quite inconceivable apart from piety, the marvel is that Patrick's piety was, in the eyes of his contemporaries, and has remained throughout the ages, one of the characteristics of his sanctity.

Is not the following an admirable and edifying avowal: "I prayed frequently during the day, and the love of God increased in me more and more, and the Spirit was stirred, so that in a single day I have said as many as a hundred prayers and in the night nearly the same, so that I remained in the woods and on the mountain even before the dawn. I was roused to prayer in snow, and ice, and rain." (Conf. 16). This confession relates to the time of Patrick's captivity in

Ireland; what then must have been his piety when, loaded with divine favours, he saw the work of redemption which was performed by him?

The Lives of Saint Patrick written in the Irish monasteries about the tenth century give us rather a different view of the Apostle. Although these pious eulogies unite in extolling the activity of the Saint, his spirit of decision and prudence and his union with God, they show us a Patrick whom it was very dangerous to resist. I know quite well that the wicked who opposed him were more often punished without his knowledge, but these writers were haunted by certain figures of holy Abbots too much attached to their rights and privileges and most energetic in their dealings with evil. The true figure of the Saint is shown us in his *Confession*. He was entirely devoted to the Faith and to Christ; he was patient and merciful in his dealings with men; he suffered much and longed to endure yet more for the nation to which he had given himself. He would gladly have submitted even to a violent death.

The *Confession* is a defence, it is his apology, and if we had anything to fear, it would be that the Saint in his profound humility has purposely striven to hide some of those divine gifts which astonished his contemporaries, and have justified the veneration and piety of succeeding ages.

# The Death and Burial of Saint Patrick

The biographers of Saint Patrick are all agreed in showing us that he spent the last years of his life in solitude. It is then quite probable that some time before his death, the Saint resigned the government of the Church of Ireland into other hands. The Irish Annals make the death of Benignus, Saint Patrick's successor in Armagh, occur in 467; we also know that Benignus was for ten years a bishop. Thus it would be in 457 that the Apostle realised this desire, so frequent in men who have passed their lives in conflict, and in prayer and silence prepared himself for death.

Saint Patrick retired to Saul in Ulidia, the country of Dichu. It was there that he died about 461, and there also his body rested in a tomb which remained long enough unhonoured for a legend to spring up respecting the death and interment of the Saint. The number of years attributed to Saint Patrick may be traced to the similitude that they wished to find between him and Moses.

"Patrick resembles Moses in four things," remarks the scribe Ferdomnach in the passage added by him to Tirechan's *Memoir* (54). "First of all an angel spoke to him from a bush; he fasted forty days and forty nights; he was one hundred and twenty years on this earth; finally no man knows the place of his burial."

These last two remarks are incorrect; the latter especially shows that discussions arose between the churches, many of them claiming to possess the Apostle's remains. Hence came the somewhat legendary accounts we are about to relate.

Saint Patrick, being warned by an angel that his end was approaching, sent someone to Armagh, for which town he entertained a special affection. He asked that men should be sent to transport him there.

On the journey Patrick perceived at a certain spot by the wayside, a bush which was burning and yet unconsumed. An angel - not the angel Victor with whom he usually conversed - was sent to stop him: "Why hast thou set out," he said, "without the counsel of Victor. Victor bids thee return to him." The Saint declared himself willing to obey and asked what he should do. "Return to Saul, to the place from whence thou earnest, God has granted thy four requests."

The following are Patrick's four requests: that Armagh should have the Primacy; that Patrick should judge anyone who at the moment of death recited the hymn he had composed; that Dichu's posterity should not perish; that Patrick should judge the Irish people at the Last Day.

Ferdomnach gives us a different tradition from Tirechan concerning these prayers, He only quotes three petitions of Saint Patrick: that every Irishman who repented, even at the moment of death, should be saved; that the heathen nations should not always reign over Ireland; that the Irish people should completely disappear seven years before the end of the world, the sea covering the whole of the island.

Patrick returned to Saul and died on the 17th of March. Muirchu also says that Patrick died at the age of one hundred and twenty. For twelve days after the death of the Saint a bright light from heaven shone over the spot where his body lay, and the Ulidians used to relate that during the whole of that year the nights were less dark. Before dying, Patrick had received the holy Viaticum from the hands of the

saintly bishop Tassach, as the angel Victor had revealed to him.

"On the first night the angels of the Lord were watching Patrick's body with spiritual chants, and when the heavenly and celestial visitants ascended to heaven a sweet fragrance of honey and wine was exhaled." The Ulidians continued to watch over his remains on the days which followed.

## II

The angel had told the Saint that, in order to decide on the spot where he should be interred, they were to place his body on a car drawn by two wild oxen; the place where the oxen stopped should be the burial-place chosen by God; and over his tomb a church was to be erected. The angel's command was obeyed. The oxen stopped at Dun Lethglasse (Downpatrick); the body was interred there, and a church was erected over his tomb.

However, in the days that followed the Saint's death, such a fierce discussion arose between the sons of Oriel and those of Ulidia to decide where the sacred relics should rest, that blows were about to be exchanged on the banks of Lough Strangford, when a violent tempest arose and the waters covered the land and dispersed the would-be combatants.

When the waters had subsided, the men of Oriel returned armed to take away the body. At one point of the route they perceived two oxen drawing a funeral car, it seemed to them that it was the Saint's bier, which they saw approaching, and that heaven had decided in their favour. The men of Oriel then followed the car, but when they arrived at the bank of the river Cabcenne the mysterious cortege disappeared.

By this miracle God Himself interposed to prevent further discussion on the subject of his servant's remains.

Such is the legend as related by Muirchu. More recent Lives abound in still more marvellous details. But one thing is evident from them that neither Armagh nor Downpatrick was in possession of the Saint's body, which was reposing in the solitude of Saul.

### III

It seems that no relic has ever been taken from this mysterious tomb. In any case there is none existing in our days, and this would tend to prove that the veneration for Saint Patrick was chiefly propagated after the year 700, when the dissensions which had divided the Church of Ireland into two parties had ceased. The south had remained faithful to Roman customs, insensibly the North had adopted its own special practices. It is true that it was evangelised by Saint Patrick; his memory was preserved there, but he had been too faithful to the Gallic and Roman usages and consequently his popularity had somewhat suffered. The silence which surrounded his burial-place, the oblivion even into which it had fallen, can scarcely be otherwise explained.

In the Middle Ages Armagh possessed two treasures which traced their origin to Saint Patrick, a pastoral staff and a bell; the bell, which is four-sided, is formed of two bent plates of sheet iron attached by large rivets, and with an iron handle. It may be seen in the National Museum of Dublin in a reliquary, which was made about the year 1100.

There is a legend attached to Patrick's staff of which we find the first trace in the Third Life edited by Colgan.

While Patrick was in Gaul he set sail with two companions and landed on an island where a young couple was living with some decrepit old people. "They are my grandchildren," said the young man, to Patrick's question. He then explained

that having offered hospitality to Christ, the latter had rewarded him by preventing him from growing old. Besides which, Christ had left him a staff that he was to give to Patrick when he should go to preach to the Gaels.

"I will not take it," said Patrick, "unless God Himself gives it me." He stayed three days in this place, at the end of which time God again commanded him to go and evangelise Ireland, and Himself gave him the Staff of Jesus, to aid him in his struggles and defend him in danger.

The staff or crosier of Saint Patrick existed in Armagh in the eleventh century and was venerated there. The respect which surrounded it no doubt determined the creation of the legend. In 1538 the relic was burnt as an object of superstition.

# Organization of the Irish Church

We learn from Saint Patrick himself that he made known the Gospel to thousands of the heathen; that he ordained priests everywhere that they might be at the service of "an indigent and needy people"; that convents of men and women (the latter not without great difficulty) (Conf. 42) were created by his efforts. Let us try to understand something of the life and organisation of this Patrician Church.

An ancient chronicle, written in Latin before 750 by an unknown author, separates the Saints of ancient Ireland into three classes. This description may aid us in writing our present chapter.

In the first class of Catholic saints they were nearly all bishops. It begins with Saint Patrick, and numbers three hundred and fifty.

Among the monastic clergy we find three hundred names of Saints in the second class. Lastly one hundred anchorites and hermits are included in the third class.

Other details being wanting, the catalogue at least shows us the preponderant position which the bishops held in the ancient Church of Ireland.

We shall begin then by a study of the Patrician Episcopate; we shall afterwards describe the monasteries, and shall also consider the ecclesiastical legislation in Ireland.

## I

We often read in Tirechan that Patrick, after having founded a church, attached to it one or two priests, whom he chose



from among his followers; other places he put in the charge of a bishop. The choice of Episcopal churches was no doubt dictated by geographical and political considerations. No large towns then existed in Ireland which could decide, as in the case of the Roman Empire, the appointment of a bishop. But the division of the population into tribes suggested the nomination of a bishop for each tribe, and it was fitting that his place of residence should be the same as that of the king.

Thus we find that Saint Patrick appointed at least nine bishops in Connaught. This is relatively few, especially if we refer to the details which Tirechan gives us in other parts of his *Memoir*, in which he says that the Apostle appointed more than four hundred bishops in Ireland (*Tirechani Collectanea*, No. 6)

In other accounts we meet with a smaller number, but one which always exceeds three hundred. It was thus an invariable tradition that Saint Patrick had ordained many bishops. Tirechan, however, has not been able to give us more than forty-five names, and this is already considerable.

The multiplicity of tribes alone explains the number of Episcopal churches, and since we know that other churches were founded by Patrick, and that he put those who were simply priests in charge of them, we must admit that some very precise rule guided the Apostle in the establishment of Episcopal Sees.

These primitive dioceses were, later on, and sometimes even at an early date, divided for the benefit of the first churches which had been founded without a bishop and had since become important.

The considerable number of bishops in Ireland in the sixth and seventh centuries has made one suppose that Saint Patrick ordained bishops without appointing them to any particular church. If it is undeniable that the number of bishops considerably increased in Ireland one hundred years after Saint Patrick, the cause of this must be sought elsewhere than in this strange institution, of bishops without sees, which one freely ascribes to the Apostle.

The first duty of a bishop appointed by Saint Patrick was the evangelisation of the tribe in the midst of which he had settled and the oversight of the churches already founded in the territory of the tribe; he was at the same time the head of a private community, and it is to this last fact, we think, that must be attributed the multiplicity of bishops.

After Saint Patrick's time the bishop was usually a monk. If we consider the rapid extension of monastic foundations in Ireland, and the beneficial influence that the monasteries exercised there, which also extended to the churches of Gaul and Italy, it is easy for us to see that communities established in a diocese would not patiently endure the authority of a bishop who governed and had interests in neighbouring monasteries. This must have brought about the consecration of bishops without sees, whose authority was confined to their own monastery. These bishops without sees are not peculiar to Ireland, one finds them also in Gaul at the same period, and, I believe, for the same reason, but they were particularly numerous in Ireland because monastic institutions became more flourishing and numerous there than in any other country.

Besides which, it is quite evident that Saint Patrick's first care was to create a secular clergy. Inspired by the example of their chief, these would give themselves first of all, and one might say exclusively, to their apostolate. The creation

of abbots in monasteries, invested with extensive powers and especially the power of conferring Orders, was manifestly necessary.

Archbishop Healy observes very justly that the life of the saints in the first order "was too absorbed by the work of evangelisation for these bishops to be able to devote themselves to the government and foundation of the monasteries."

\* \* \*

The work which was principally enjoined on a bishop was the building of his church; he worked at it with his own hands, thus setting an example. On one of Saint Patrick's journeys in Connaught, one of his disciples, the Bishop Olcan, wishing to erect a church for himself, and having obtained Saint Patrick's permission, started into the forest with his axe on his shoulders. This episode, which we read in the *Tripartite Life*, was not an isolated case.

The church, a simple rectangle, was never more than sixty feet long, sometimes not more than fifteen feet; it was built of wood. Tirechan is careful to mention that Patrick built a church of clay on the spot where he met the sons of Amolngaid, the forest being too distant.

The Irish were attached to this form of architecture and adopted it. Thus when Saint Malachy, Bishop of Armagh, commenced to erect a large stone church at Bangor, one of the natives, who was looking on astonished at his work, said to him: "What can have given you the idea, my good man, of introducing this kind of building? We are Scots and not Gauls, and we do not want such novelties. Do you think we can afford to finish it, or that we shall live long enough?"

If we cannot say exactly what consideration was enjoyed by the first bishops without sees, the influence and authority of the secular bishops appears from the very first to be quite indisputable. They were regarded as the equals of kings. The code of laws, "the Senchus Mor," establishes this preponderant situation, and bears undeniable testimony to it. An unjust king and an unfaithful bishop are placed on the same footing; the testimony of a king may prevail against any of his subjects, except the wise man, the bishop, and the pilgrim. In this last clause of the Irish legislation the Bishop has replaced the Druid; and this provision belongs to the most ancient Celtic law.

If one now considers that the Secular Episcopate in Ireland diminished in importance in the centuries following, owing to the extension of the monastic life, one must admit then that the eminent dignity attached to the Episcopal office and consecrated by Irish legislation dates from the age of Saint Patrick, that the Apostle established sees with clearly defined limits, thoroughly organised the Catholic hierarchy, and knew how to make its grandeur understood by the people he came to convert.

## II

What we have just read shows us what idea we must form of the organisation of the Church of Ireland by Saint Patrick. Some imply that he established a monastic church there. But it is impossible that this was the case, and the reason is found in the evangelisation of Ireland itself, which was incontestably rapid.

However great may be the part we attribute to miracle in this conversion of the Irish people, that of human activity necessarily remains extraordinarily large, and one cannot imagine how it could have been filled if the clergy recruited

by Saint Patrick and his disciples had at once cloistered themselves behind those trenches and earthen walls which marked the boundaries of the ancient monasteries in Ireland.

Saint Patrick encouraged monastic foundations; this fact is attested by him in his Confession. But monastic life developed and became preponderant chiefly towards the middle of the sixth century. It rendered marvellous services, first of all to Ireland and then to the entire Church. It preserved to Ireland, isolated as she was from the rest of the world by the continual migrations of the barbarous hordes which traversed Gaul and Italy, her faith and her ideal of sanctity; thus Ireland became the Isle of Saints. Then Irish monks, settled for instance at Luxeuil and Bobbio, brought to the ancient churches of Gaul and Italy, pillaged and ruined as they were by heathen invaders, that which Auxerre and Rome had generously given to their own country saints and scholars and a generous and mortified Christian race.

I have said that Saint Patrick could not think that a Catholic church ought to exist without any centres of monastic life. Furthermore, the temperament of the newly-made Christians impelled them towards the solitude of the cloister.

What then was the situation of the communities founded by him? The only information we have is from fragmentary documents, and in order to complete these, we must turn to what we know and we have minute details of the life and position of the monasteries in subsequent ages.

It seems useless to dwell on what might have been the discipline, offices, life, mortifications and work in a monastery. All these details may be found in other books, and have no direct bearing on our subject. It is better to

insist on the position of the monastery as regards the tribe in whose territory it was established.

Tirechan and Muirchu lead us to think that there were several kinds of donations. That will not surprise us if we remember what has already been said of the ancient laws concerning property in Ireland.

Sometimes the owner of the land did not give up all his rights to the monastery. Armagh and Trim were founded under this regime. In that case there were two heads of the ecclesiastical community: the Abbot and the chief member of the donor's family. The first administered the fortune of the monastery subject to the control of the second.

In other cases the Abbot was chosen from among the descendants of the founder, supposing that one of the members of his family was suitable for the office; otherwise the Abbot was elected from a monastery mentioned in its title-deeds, or else taken from the monastery itself.

The forms of donation that we find in Tirechan and Muirchu vary without one being able to exactly determine what inference should be drawn from the different wordings. It seems, however, that when the sons of Caichan offered a freehold to God and to Patrick, and the sons of Conlaid gave to God and Patrick their eight measures of land in perpetuity, that they gave up all their rights; at the most, they did but gain for their tribe the privilege of nominating the head of the community which they established.

Men who lived on the ground thus bequeathed escaped from the dominion of the King to fall under the rule of the Abbot.

The first-fruits and the tithes were due to the monastery; the first-born in each family was brought up there, as well as any

children which a man of the tribe had dedicated to the religious life.

These rights possessed by the monastery over the tribe certainly did not exist in the time of Saint Patrick. But at that epoch, as later on, the monastery had to ensure the religious life of the tribe. We may state with certainty that a close tie existed between the tribe and the community, and that the internal organisation of the monastery followed that of the tribe. The monks were considered the companions of the Abbot and formed his family.

The anchorites and the hermits, who form the third class of Irish saints, were in Ireland, as everywhere else, exceptions. Still they made their appearance from the time of Saint Patrick; they used to seek some solitary spot in which to spend their lives in prayer and contemplation. Saint Donald, one of the Apostle's disciples, built himself a hermitage on the highest summit of the Mourne Mountains.

We have already heard, and we shall hear later, of men who entering a bark, and abandoning themselves to Providence, reached the shores of some desert island, there to spend the rest of their lives.

Others would choose to remain in the boat, only landing from time to time to get provisions, and hearing no voice but that of the tempest.

### III

Christianity was first introduced into Ireland by Colonists from Britain. When Saint Patrick began his Apostolate, the churches already existing there followed a special liturgy, and had their own paschal cycle. There is no doubt that the liturgy brought over by Saint Patrick and his companions was the Gallic one, and that they celebrated Easter at the

same time as Rome and all the Western churches. We know that the Apostle tried to substitute this liturgy for the British one, but his efforts were unsuccessful.

Can we say that he imposed the Gallic use in all the churches founded by him? In any case from the sixth century the British liturgy was universal.

From the death of Saint Patrick to the end of the seventh century profound modifications were made in the Church of Ireland; such changes were inevitable, as the character of the Irish people demanded them.

Great as was the Saint's perspicacity, he had neither foreseen nor prepared for all these, so that the organisation which he established in the Church of Ireland can scarcely be recognised in that which we find there two centuries later. One thing, however, remained unchanged: this was the use of the Latin tongue, thanks to which the reconciliation between North and South was able to be effected.

It would be an exaggeration to assert that Saint Patrick introduced the use of the Latin alphabet, but he certainly aided considerably in its extension. The elements of religion, the sacred books, that his clerks used to copy and that he offered to the churches, were all written in Latin; and it was these precious souvenirs that the piety of the faithful loved to reproduce and which created between Ireland and Rome the strongest possible bond - that of language.

When the revolutions and invasions in Gaul had at length ceased, Rome and Ireland could meet and were able to understand one another.

We have already said elsewhere that Saint Patrick entertained the same respect for the See of Rome as the



Bishops of Gaul, among whom he had been trained for the priesthood. Like them, he saw in the Bishop of Rome the supreme judge of any difficulties which might arise in local churches.

We know that Saint Patrick, with the bishops Auxilius and Iserninus, drew up a circular letter addressed to the priests and deacons and all the clergy of Ireland.

Now, one of the Canons in this letter enacts that if any difficult question should arise in the Isle, it was to be submitted to the Apostolic See.

The Unity of the Church was one of the chief points of Saint Patrick's faith, one of the first truths which he taught. He considered it an essential for entering her Communion. We have only to remember the question which he put to the daughters of Laeghaire at the moment when he was about to baptize them: "Do you believe in the Unity of the Church?"

The authenticity of the Canon, which ordains an appeal to Rome in difficult cases, is undeniable. This Canon was the expression of Saint Patrick's faith; if we only consider it from a purely human point of view we must be convinced of its wisdom. In a new church like that of Ireland, conflicts would inevitably arise. Who would decide them? What church would have sufficient authority to dictate to the others? Armagh, no doubt, and Saint Patrick strove to make this See pre-eminent in the Isle; but above Armagh, the Saint's faith pointed to Rome.

The circular letter organises the discipline of the Irish church. The canons are in no consecutive order. The bishops drew them up, prompted simply by the abuses which had fallen under their own notice. They had chiefly to do with rules imposed on the clergy.

For instance, bishops going beyond the boundaries of their own dioceses used to interfere in the religious life of their neighbours; clerks of a roving disposition persisted in not attaching themselves to any church; others of an independent character built churches and celebrated the Sacred Mysteries without having asked any bishop to consecrate the new temple; others again used to receive gifts from the pagans, or would solicit alms for the ransom of slaves, and lastly, certain clerics came over from Britain to preach in Ireland.

Henceforth the British priests were to perform no sacred function unless the Irish bishops had given them a written permission to do so; one would now need a special permission to receive alms destined for the ransom of slaves; it was sternly forbidden to accept the least offering from a pagan; all churches were to be consecrated by bishops; the latter were to be careful not to go beyond the limits of their dioceses; each priest was to choose a church to which he should remain attached.

This letter of the bishops also proclaimed the sanctity and indissolubility of marriage and the lofty character of the betrothal.

It fixed the duration of public penance for certain sins: homicide, fornication and idolatry. These were the same crimes for which the Eastern churches and those of Africa and Rome had prescribed penances, after having long hesitated to pardon them. For these cases the Irish bishops ordered a year's penance. I would here remark that at the time when they published this rule, public penance was already disappearing in the older Christian churches.

# **The Writings and Spirit of Saint Patrick**

## **I**

The marvellous and fruitful apostolic labour of Saint Patrick excluded one form of human energy by which many saints have rendered the Church illustrious; I mean literary activity, for Saint Patrick was hardly prepared to exercise it. For he confesses "his ignorance and too slow tongue" (Conf. 11). "Therefore I thought of writing long ago, but I feared the censure of men because I had not learned as the others who studied the sacred writings in the best way, and have never changed their language since their childhood, but continually learnt it more perfectly." (Conf. 3)

The events which marked Patrick's youth prevented him from studying, and no doubt Providence had refused him this special gift which belongs to the Doctors of the Church. If, however, it had been necessary to defend the Faith in the churches which he had recently founded, we may rest assured Saint Patrick would have had no hesitation in doing so. He believed (Conf. 11) that the tongues of stammerers shall speak readily of peace, "that husbandry was ordained by the Most High," and he did not doubt that an epistle written, if not with eloquence, "yet with power and endurance," and sanctified by the Spirit of the Living God would bring forth fruit.

If Saint Patrick had written he would have given us an account of his journeys, his missions, and of the churches which he founded in the pagan land of Ireland.

In fact, when the occasion came for writing, the Saint seized it. We possess two very short works of Saint Patrick. They are not distinguished by literary merit, but they illustrate the apostolic character of the Saint.

It is by continually referring to the Confession and the Epistle against Coroticus that we have endeavoured in the sixth chapter to trace the portrait of the Apostle. What we have already said now authorises us to speak briefly and from a special point of view of the Confession and the Epistle against Coroticus.

Both of these works, which were written under peculiar circumstances, are the works of Patrick towards the close of his life.

## II

The *Confession* is an answer and a defence. Patrick was accused of being unlearned. What right had he then to make himself head of a church? The Saint does not deny his ignorance, still, when relating his youth, he lets it be seen that Providence had not permitted him to study, therefore if he had become the head of a Church it was because the Holy Spirit had so willed it. They then accused him of not being disinterested; to this he replies that his Apostolate had been a continual source of suffering to him.

For the young Patrick, Ireland was the land of captivity; and such it remained for Patrick the Apostle. He has no desire to rule over the people: he has gained nothing personally by his missions; and he always sends back any presents which are offered him.

Lastly, they reproached him with a youthful error. This reproach was the result of treachery. During his stay at Auxerre the saint had told one of his compatriots, in

confidence, of a fault he had committed when about fifteen years of age. No doubt his soul was filled with misgiving and scruples; this is all we can conclude from the avowal, for who can say whether he could have really been guilty?

"From anxiety and sorrow of mind," writes the Apostle, "I told my dearest friend what I had done in my youth, in one day, nay, rather in one hour, because I was not then able to overcome. I know not, God knows, if I was then fifteen years of age, and from my childhood I did not believe in the Living God." (Conf. 27) This remembrance of a fault when it leaves so vague an impression can only be due rather to the scrupulous conscience of a cleric, and was not in itself a lamentable fall.

This had not hindered the friend to whom Patrick had opened his heart from speaking of him with admiration and praise, and predicting for him the most brilliant future, the most eminent dignity, to which both of them could aspire. (Conf. 32)

After thirty years this unworthy friend, incited by jealousy, revealed the secret confided to him by Patrick.

The latter, when writing, does not deny this past fault. What saint is there who is not willing to own his unfaithfulness? But if the person of Patrick were arraigned, his Apostolate would, at the same time, be menaced.

Therefore it is that he represents his work as inspired by God Himself. The Apostle says he has in every circumstance followed supernatural inspirations; that he may be a feeble and unworthy instrument he does not seek to deny, but he is certainly an instrument in the hands of God.

The Confession does not relate any miraculous details, because to Patrick the greatest miracle seems his own life,

and the success he has attained surpasses all the revelations God had made to him.

### III

The *Epistle against Coroticus* is also the act of an Apostle. It seems to have been written before the Confession, and probably dates from the time of Saint Patrick's retirement to Saul.

As the Roman legions were recalled to defend their city from the invasions of the barbarians, there arose on the borders of the Empire a number of enterprising petty chieftains who succeeded the Roman officials and took into their pay the reduced garrisons of legionaries or mercenaries who had been left behind to maintain order. The resources of these chiefs were very limited and their soldiers lived principally by rapine and pillage. They used to organise, with the partial complicity of the one they regarded as their master, rapid incursions from which they returned with a rich booty, and with captives who were taken to Bristol which was then a great market for slaves.

One of these chieftains, named Coroticus, had settled at Dumbarton; he was a Christian. One day some of the soldiers in his service made a descent in Ireland, probably in Ulidia. At one place where a Christian ceremony had been held, they seized the newly baptized converts and carried off a vast number of them. The Saint, who was then in the neighbourhood, sent one of his disciples, a priest, with some clerics to the pirates. The messenger was the bearer of a letter in which the Apostle begged that the neophytes should be restored. This was received with mockery and insult.

Saint Patrick then wrote an Epistle which was to be read to all the Christians in the land of Coroticus and before Coroticus himself. Although the Chieftain had not organised the expedition, he had not hindered it; therefore he was guilty, and Saint Patrick excommunicated him until he set free the newly baptized captives that had been brought to him.

The *Epistle* is a vigorous protest, beginning thus: "It is the custom of Rome and Gaul to send holy men to the Franks and other nations, with many thousand solidi to redeem baptized captives; you slay them and sell them to foreign nations ignorant of God." (Ep. 14)

The Epistle is also a condemnation. "I beseech you, therefore, who are the holy ones of God and humble of heart, that you will not be flattered by such men, and that you will neither eat nor drink with them nor receive their alms, until they do penance with many tears." (Ep. 7)

Again the *Epistle* is a lamentation and reveals the tenderness of the Apostle's heart. "The Church laments and bewails her sons and daughters, not slain by the sword but sent away to distant countries, where sin is more shameless and abounds. There free-born Christian men are sold and enslaved among the wicked, abandoned and apostate Picts. Therefore I cry but with grief and sorrow, O beautiful and well-beloved brethren and children, whom I have brought forth in Christ in such multitudes, what shall I do for you? I am not worthy before God or man to come to your assistance. The wicked have prevailed over us, we have become outcasts. It would seem that they do not think we have one Baptism and one Father, God. They think it an indignity that we have been born in Ireland; as it is said: 'Have ye not one God? Why do ye each forsake his neighbour?' (Malachi, ii. 10)" (Epistle 15,16)

## IV

We must not look for any dogmatic teaching in the two short works of Saint Patrick. Still I think that by making use of the general idea of the *Confession* and of one expression which we read in this work we may discover the ideas which dominated the religious thought of the Saint.

The theological controversies which were dividing the Church of Gaul, at the time when Patrick was staying of Auxerre, were concerned with the Arian and Pelagian heresies.

During the exile of Saint Athanasius at Treves (336-338) the bishops of Gaul were acquainted with the disputes which were then agitating the East. The clear intelligence of their race easily enabled the Gallic bishops to refute the subtleties of the Eastern theologians.

Thus the preachers who were the clearest exponents of the dogma of the Trinity were at the head of the churches in Italy and Gaul.

The Council of Sardica (343-344) declared Saint Athanasius innocent, and the bishops of Gaul were among those who delivered this judgment.

It is true that at the Council of Rimini, which lasted seven months, and, for the bishops taking part in it, resembled a forced detention rather than a period of free discussion, twenty Gallic bishops allowed themselves to be deceived by the specious arguments of the heretics. But on their return to Gaul, they changed their opinion and condemned the heresy.

Even the populace took part in these Arian conflicts, and they were violent enough. Many writings of great value, as



those of Saint Hilary of Poitiers, appeared in defence of the true faith. They were studied by the scholars in the Episcopal Schools; Saint Patrick's teaching shows this formation. [note - Saint Hilary was exiled in Phrygia for having opposed the Arian heresy; Saint Patrick was not ignorant of this exile.]

He writes: "In the measure, therefore, of the faith of the Trinity." (Conf. 14) Why this precision as to the object of faith, if the doctrine of the Trinity had not appeared to Saint Patrick so necessary and all important?

We do not, it is true, find anything analogous in the rest of the writing. But compare with it what the Saint says of the reality of Jesus Christ, of the work of the Holy Spirit in his life; let us see the formula which ends the Epistle: "Peace to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost," and we must be convinced that the preaching of the existence of One God in Three Persons was the favourite theme of Saint Patrick.

The traditions relating to the Apostle confirm this opinion. One has only to refer to the instructions which the Saint gave to the daughters of Laeghaire (chapter 5, paragraph 2). The account of this meeting does not give an exact reproduction of Saint Patrick's words, but we find in it the reflection of the teaching which was familiar to him, and on which he insisted: "Our God is the God of all men, the God of heaven and earth, of the sea and the rivers. . . . He has a Son co-eternal with Himself; the Son is not younger than the Father, the Father is not older than the Son, and the Holy Spirit appears in the midst of them; the Father, the Son and the Spirit are not separated."

The heresy of Pelagius, which was more recent, came from Britain. One knows the substance of it: the negation of

original sin; of indifference to good or evil; therefore a diminution of the results of the sin of Adam, and as a consequence, of the value of Redemption by Jesus Christ.

Twice Saint Patrick's master, Saint Germanus, passed over into Britain to combat the Pelagian teaching. One may imagine the deep interest which this question inspired in the minds of those who were studying in the School of Auxerre. Now the general idea of the Confession is that the Apostle is nothing by himself, but that the grace of God, acting through him, realised marvels. "The voice of the children from the forest of Foclut," which Saint Patrick heard, depicted to him the miserable state of those pagan souls, and seemed to implore him to carry to them the grace of baptism. Saint Patrick was clearly anti-Pelagian.

## Conclusion

The organisation of the Christian parts of Ireland and the evangelisation of the pagan provinces were the result of Saint Patrick's apostolic work.

One special trait marks the Apostle's enterprise. He was the first missionary who carried the Gospel into a land situated beyond the borders of the Roman Empire. In the heart of the Empire, Christianity, protected by the Imperial Government, proceeded tranquilly and slowly in its conquest of souls. The Apostle, who desired to evangelise Ireland, ran a great risk of coming into collision with the ill-will of the rulers of the country; he could only count too upon his own resources and powers. The mere fact of attempting such an undertaking shows a very uncommon spirit of initiative.

We have elsewhere spoken of the qualities of the Apostle, and sketched the religious organisation which he gave to the Church of Ireland. Under the influence of the particularist character or individuality of the Irish people, and the development of monastic life, the Church founded by Saint Patrick differed in some degree from the plan traced by the Apostle.

He wished for a church firmly attached to Rome, he would not allow the sacred books to be translated into the Irish language, and he introduced the use of Latin.

But particular events isolated Ireland from the Roman world. Gradually the people returned to the customs of the British Church; they adhered to the ancient mode of fixing the celebration of Easter, and the Roman tonsure was exchanged for the Celtic which went from ear to ear.

Saint Patrick's name, too, lost some of the lustre which ought to have been attached to it. But this was revived later, when in the seventh century the dissensions between the north and south of the island ceased and the Roman customs and usages were universally adopted in Ireland. It was then remembered that these had been brought there by Saint Patrick.

The Saint before all else was a man of God, and his influence was incalculable. Not only did he bring the Truth to an almost unknown land, but the messengers of this same Truth set forth later to conquer the heathen of Scotland and Britain; while Ireland, through the emigration of its monks, was to render to France and Italy more than she had ever received from them.

Humility too, is one of the features of Saint Patrick's character; and its source was in his deeply religious temperament. But let us not deceive ourselves. The finest moral qualities in a man are perpetually neutralised by his affinity to evil.

Sanctity can only exist by means of strenuous effort. By his mortifications and prayers, Saint Patrick set free the spiritual forces which were within him, and the struggle lasted as it would last all through the Apostle's life.

Obedience, another characteristic of the Saints, endowed Patrick with an energy and a capacity for resistance which surpassed human strength, and an enthusiasm which awakened in him the clear view of the goal he wished to attain, and which was independent of success because it was based upon Faith.

Holy Scripture tells us that God "exalteth the humble," and giveth victory to the man who consents to be a docile

instrument in His hands.

The glory and success of Saint Patrick are a fresh justification of the Sacred Word.

## About This EBook

The text of this ebook is taken from the book *Saint Patrick (about 389-461)*, by the Abbé Riguet, Curé of Saint Denis de l'Hotel, Loiret. The edition used was translated by "C.W.W." and published by Benziger Brothers in 1912.

It has the Nihil Obstat of Father Osmund Cooney, O.F.M., Censor deputatus; and the Imprimatur of Father Edmund Surmont, Vicar General, Archdiocese of Westminster, England, 21 December 1911.

The print book contained several appendices that deal with academic arguments about the sources of the documents and legends consulted. These seemed of little interest to anyone interested in a biography of Saint Patrick or the effects of his work, and have been omitted.

The cover image is a detail of a stained glass window of Saint Patrick, date and artist unknown. The window is in the 4th window of the north wall of the Church of Our Lady, Star of the Sea and Saint Patrick in Goleen, County Cork, Ireland. It was photographed on 10 September 2009 by Andreas F. Borchert, and the image was swiped from [Wikimedia Commons](#).

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